



“And then all Israel will be saved”

Our responsibility

When Paul in Romans 11:26a uses the expression ‘all Israel’ he means the people of Israel as a whole. This became clear in my previous article. The next question, then, is how and when, according to Paul, the salvation of all Israel will be realized. In Romans 11 there is an interaction between Jews and Gentiles, which can be described as wave-like. When we understand Paul’s expectation within the context of his apostolic mission, we also note a powerful appeal regarding our responsibility towards the Jewish people.

1. Gentiles and Jews: a parallel

The symmetrical structure of vv. 30 and 31 illustrates the parallel Paul sees between his audience (we noted previously that here he is addressing people of Gentile descent) and the Jewish people. In the past, the Gentiles did not believe; now they have found mercy with God. That could happen because of the unbelief of Jews, who refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. The Jews in their turn do not believe, but would God not show mercy to His own people? He could, because mercy had been shown to those who were not Jews.

The thing that stands out is that *everyone*, whether Jew or Gentile, depends on this divine mercy. It is this mercy that sets unbelief aside. This truth redirects the problem that Paul is grappling with to God’s election. This was already pointed out in vv. 28, 29. God’s gifts and His call are irrevocable.

In the Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text, the word *nun* has been placed in square brackets. Internal and external considerations with regard to this reading balance each other out. External considerations, however, clearly argue against a reading that includes *nun*. It cannot be shown, therefore, that the conversion of Israel already takes place in the present, as some would suggest.¹ How then must we deal with this dubious little word *nun*? There are two possibilities. Either we do not read *nun*, because it doesn’t belong to the original text,² or we can regard it as a reference to the future: something that is to happen soon, or a prophetic turn of events that somehow, as it were, draws the future into the present. Either way, it is the mercy of God that Paul emphasizes. That’s what it is really about.

The textual parallel between Paul’s audience (of Gentile descent) on the one hand, and Jews on the other, can be shown in this way, the word NOW describing the present state of affairs:

Verse 30	Verse 31
You (=Gentiles)	They (=Jews)
Once	NOW
unbelieving	unbelieving
NOW	(nun)
mercy	mercy
through their unbelief	through the mercy shown to you

2. God’s mercy to all

The word ‘all’ (*pantas*) in the concluding verse 32, referring to the mercy of God, can only mean: ‘mercy towards all, both Jews and Gentiles’. And so this passage concludes with the hope-inspiring

mercy of the God of Israel for everyone who seeks his or her salvation with Jesus Christ: “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all.”

The secret that Paul wanted to share with his Gentile audience in Rome is that God has not rejected His people. Together with Ridderbos, we could speak of an interaction between Jews and Gentiles,³ or, as Matter described it: a wavelike movement of salvation. He wrote: “*Israel’s deplorable fall does something for the Gentiles; in their (the Gentiles’) conversion the grace they (the Jews) rejected knocks with renewed and victorious strength on Israel’s door. There is no primacy: God has bound them all over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all. But there is a discernible history of salvation.*” What Paul saw as a possibility in vv. 11-15, has now proved to be reality, says Matter.⁴ Psalm 90 really is true for all believers: generations come and generations go – and we have all been included in the mercy of God.

3. The conversion of Israel

It is true that the Eternal One fulfils all His promises, but that does not mean that the salvation of Israel is some kind of automatism. It goes by way of conversion, the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Saviour of the world. How should we picture that in concrete terms? This is and remains a difficult question. One can think of three possibilities:

Post-historic: All Israel will be converted, in the same manner as Paul on the road to Damascus, through an appearance of Christ Himself. They will hear the Gospel as the word of the returning Christ (*rhèma Christou*: Romans 10:17). This idea, however, raises serious questions. Why would Paul have had such deep and unceasing anguish in his heart (ch. 9:3), if at the same time he nurtured the hope that in the end, all would be well with Israel? Second: would this not lead, for the unbelieving part of Israel, to a willy-nilly election? Third: in most cases, the prophetic expectation mentions the restoration of Israel first, and after that a consequent coming in of the Gentiles is expected. Paul’s order is exactly the reverse. For these reasons, this is not a very useful possibility.

End-historic: ‘*all Israel will be converted*’ refers only to the end-time, after the salvation of the Gentiles, and relates directly to the return of Christ. His coming will remove all ungodliness (= unbelief). Baarlink puts it this way: “*After the mission to the Gentiles has reached its goal, there will be an opening in Israel for the Gospel and a turning to Christ*”.⁵ This too raises critical questions. To what extent can the generation of the end-time still be considered ‘all Israel’? This possibility does not fit an any eschatological template, and it has not, according to Ridderbos, been elucidated by even one single exegete. Paul sees no other way for the conversion of Israel than the preaching of the Gospel throughout history.⁶

Redemptive-historic: ‘all Israel will be converted’ upon the preaching of Paul and other evangelists, once their mission to the Gentiles has been completed. Both Matter⁷ and Munck⁸ have advanced this possibility.

Munck’s solution, however, was met with the objection that ‘hearing the Gospel’ is not the same as ‘entering the Kingdom’. Nowhere else does Paul use the expression ‘entering’ in a descriptive sense, and so, suggests Munck, here it must simply mean ‘coming to’. This, however, is a forced and unsatisfying construction.

The objection raised against Matter’s solution was that v. 26 seems to refer to the return of Jesus Christ. In point 4, above, I have already shown that this objection is not well supported exegetically. V. 26 does not so much deal with the coming Messiah as it does with God’s work of salvation, which has Zion as its centre. This possibility, therefore, remains standing.

The redemptive-historical approach appears to provide the best perspective. It does, however, need to be augmented with a future-directed dynamic. Paul had laid a foundation for further construction in the future. It is possible that Paul saw the two as lying in the same line, the history of redemption and the history of the end-time. Jesus Christ Himself had indicated this when He said: “...*this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all*

nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10). For the apostle Paul, this was entirely consistent with his missionary strategy: first the Jews and then the Gentiles. Then why not, by extension, make another move towards the Jews, either by himself or by his successors? Hopefully all Israel, aroused to envy by the conversion of so many Gentiles (ch. 11:11), might as yet surrender to the Gospel.

Three factors, however, ensured that things went differently from what Paul had hoped: His journey to Spain did not bring about the great breakthrough that he had anticipated. For whatever reason, this journey was not especially successful, and no church in Spain claims to have been established by Paul himself. What is more, the timescale of God's plan proved to be much longer than expected. The passing away of the present form of this world (1 Corinthians 7:29-31) took much longer than Paul had envisaged.

There was little in the Christianized world that would arouse the Jews to envy. So often, there was an intermingling of Christianity and paganism. Non-Jewish Christians claimed exclusive authority to explain the Scriptures. Jews were accused of deicide. In spite of Paul's words of warning, Gentile Christians *had* become conceited. They believed that God's work had reached its culmination with them.

The Jews continued to be deeply obstinate. In Isaiah's words, the people of God's choice had always been a disobedient and obstinate people (Isaiah 65:2, quoted in Romans 10:21). Paul's conditional clause is significant: "...if they do not persist in unbelief" (ch. 11:23), they will be grafted in again. Unfortunately, so very few Jews met this condition. Among Jews, those who confess the Messiah are still very much in the minority.

4. Consequences

Was Paul mistaken? I do not believe so. His expectation was perfectly justified, in view of the divine mystery of salvation, which formed the foundation for his apostolate. Behind the future for the Gentiles, Paul also saw a future for his own people with Jesus Christ. But the things Paul shared by letter with the congregation in Rome about the salvation of Israel, had a prophetic perspective that was much more complex than he could imagine. The redemptive-historic and missionary significance of his words have proved to reach right into our own time.

And this leads us finally to the question: what are the consequences of the foregoing for contemporary Christianity? Answering this challenging question requires a sense of involvement. A search for answers could best begin, perhaps, with what has been discussed at the end of point 7, above.

In his patience with the world, God still gives time for repentance, and that is our salvation (2 Peter 3:8, 9). We live in the perspective of the Kingdom. As we pray for its coming, we are called to enter in faith ourselves, and to show others that there is no other Name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Whether these people are of Jewish or Gentile descent, outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation. This worldwide appeal only becomes the more urgent as the centuries pass. We recognize the anguish of Paul's heart because of Israel (Romans 9:2). There are many points of recognition between the church and the synagogue, but each of these evokes tensions as well. It grieves us that we cannot share the joy of Jesus Christ with all Jews. Our hands, too, must be stretched out to a disobedient and obstinate people (see Romans 10:21). That will lead us to intensive prayers for Israel. What's more, we must try to draw Israel to its Messiah. Do we, as Gentile Christians, arouse any envy among Israel? That is precisely what Paul commends to his audience in Romans 12: by means of a Christian ethic and way of life Jews may as yet be made receptive to the Gospel of Christ.⁹

Jews who confess the Messiah deserve our support. More than ourselves, they know the existential yearning Paul had for his people. Too often, they are regarded as an oddity within the Christian church. Must they, as much as possible, assimilate with the Gentile majority, or may they preserve their Jewish identity? Does mother church nurture those of her children who are

descended from Israel?¹⁰ And we ought not to forget fellow-Christians of Arabic descent either, for since time immemorial they too have lived in the land.

The explanation of Romans 11:26, as developed above, shows us that we as 21st-century Christians may be fully involved in what Paul envisaged when he wrote his letter to the church in Rome. Throughout the ages, the relationship between Israel and the church continues to deserve careful attention. Our Christian responsibility in this regard is activated by the expectation Paul expresses concerning the salvation of all Israel. *Ora et labora*. In so doing, we may confidently lay the future in the hand of God. May Messianic peace be the portion of us all!

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Endnotes:

¹ H. de Jong boldly states: "This word is essential" (*Van oud naar nieuw. De ontwikkelingsgang van het Oude naar het Nieuwe Testament*. Kampen: Kok, 2002, 306-307).

² D. Holwerda, 'Heel Israël behouden', in: *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*. Kampen: Voorhoeve, 1998, 183- 184.

³ H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, 360.

⁴ H.M. Matter, "'Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden". Waarheid en verdichting rondom Rom. 11:26a', in: N.J. Hommes e.a. (ed.), *Arcana Revelata* (feestbundel F.W. Grosheide). Kampen: Kok, 1951, 59-68. (translation mine – AP)

⁵ H. Baarlink, *Romeinen II* (Tekst en Toelichting). Kampen: Kok, 1989, 66. (translation mine – AP)

⁶ H. Ridderbos, *Israël. II: Israël in het Nieuwe Testament, in het bijzonder volgens Romeinen 9-11*. Den Haag: Van Keulen, 1955, 59-62; with a reference to Paul's argument in Romans 10:14-17.

⁷ Matter concludes that the world-shaking breakthrough to the Gentiles took place in the first four centuries of Christendom. "The *plèrooma* of the Gentiles (alas,) lies behind us." ('Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden', 68). In this view, a missionary orientation to the future is lacking, for Matter opposes the notion that God has assigned a permanent place to Israel in the history of salvation

⁸ J. Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte*. København: Munksgaard, 1954; idem, *Christus und Israel: eine Auslegung von Röm 9-11*. København: Munksgaard, 1956.

⁹ A.L.Th de Bruijne has developed this point extensively in: 'Christelijke ethiek tussen wet, schepping en gemeenschap. Een positionering naar aanleiding van Romeinen 12:1 en 2', *Radix* 27 (2001): 116-148.

¹⁰ E.A. de Boer, 'Mag ik de Davidsster dragen?', *De Reformatie* 83 (2008): 675-678.