

The Calling of Gentiles to Jewish Evangelism

A Study of Romans 11

Jonathan Sacks

BACKGROUND

In 49 AD, all Jewish people, including Jewish believers, were expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius. In 54 AD, following the death of Claudius, Jewish people were allowed to return to Rome. By then things had changed. The leadership of the church was now exclusively Gentile. Jewish believers, in smaller numbers, again became part of the church. Paul wrote his letter to the Gentile believers in Rome with a number of overarching purposes, including:

1. To explain the gospel as it applies to Gentiles and Jews with respect to justification (Chapters 1-5);
2. To explain the impact of the gospel with respect to the need to be dead to sin and to the law, to present our members as instruments of righteousness to God, and the ultimate victory we have over sin through the Holy Spirit (Chapters 6-8);
3. To explain God's plan for Israel and His purpose for Gentiles in fulfilling that plan (Chapters 9-11);
4. To explain the crisis and process of sanctification/transformation and earmarks of the transformed life (Chapters 12-15); and
5. To greet and name those who exemplified the transformed life and inform the Roman believers of his intention to visit them (Chapter 16).

This article concerns the third major purpose listed above. While the entire section, Romans 9-11, explains God's plan for Israel, Chapter 11 describes God's purpose for Gentiles in fulfilling that plan. Thus, while occasionally referring to prior chapters to provide context, this article will focus on Chapter 11, specifically, God's calling of Gentiles to Jewish evangelism.

Issues Raised by Romans 10:18-21

Romans 10:18-21 states that Israel rejected God's message of salvation, but that Gentiles would be saved. Chapter 10 concludes with a quote from Isaiah 65:2:

21 But as for Israel He says, "All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." (*NASB*)

This response of Israel to God naturally raises two questions:

1. Has God rejected all of Israel?; and
2. Is Israel's unbelief permanent?

Has God Rejected Israel?

Paul addressed the first question in Romans 11:1-10. In verse 1, Paul emphatically answered the first question:

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. (NASB)

Paul answered the question in the strongest language, “May it never be!” or “Absolutely not!” In contemporary language we would say, “No way!”

However, for the last 17 centuries, the answer of many Gentile believers has been, “Yes!—God is done with Israel, and their blessings have been given to the church.” This has become known as Replacement Theology.

Paul continued by presenting proof that God has not rejected Israel. His first proof, or “Exhibit A,” is Paul himself. Paul stated that he is Jewish, a biological descendent of Abraham, through the tribe of Benjamin. In other words, he argued, “I’m Jewish! If God was totally done with Jewish people, I would not be saved. I am proof that God is not finished with Israel.”

Paul’s second proof, or “Exhibit B,” is found in verses 2-6:

- 2 God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?
- 3 "Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life."
- 4 But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal."
- 5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.
- 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Verse two begins by reiterating the fact that God has not rejected Israel. Paul then refers to Elijah’s complaint against Israel that is recorded in 1 Kings 19:10 and repeated in verse 14.

In 1 Kings 19:15-18 God responded to Elijah’s complaint by telling him to get up, go and anoint Jehu king over Israel and Elisha as the prophet to replace himself. God also pronounced judgment over Israel. In verse 18, the Lord made the response referred to in Romans 11:4:

1 Kings 19:18

Yet I will leave 7,000 in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal and every mouth that has not kissed him.

Romans 11:5-6 explains that, just as there was a remnant of Jewish people who followed God in Elijah's day, there was a remnant of Jewish believers in Paul's day:

Romans 11:5-6

- 5 In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice.
- 6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Roman believers, the majority of the Jewish people had rejected God. But God had preserved a remnant of Israel who embraced Jesus and wholeheartedly followed God. This remnant included Paul, the disciples, those who repented at Pentecost and many others.¹ Thus, Paul argued that God was not finished with Israel in spite of their apostasy.

The believing Jewish remnant in Paul's day and throughout church history is in fulfillment of God's promise that there would always be a believing remnant of Jewish people.² Verses 5-6 tell us that this remnant of Jewish believers exists by God's gracious choice—not because of their works.

In summary, Paul has conclusively answered the first question. God has not cast away His people. A remnant has always believed. A remnant of Jewish believers in Jesus remains to this day.

The Two Groups that Comprise Israel

Verse 7 of Romans 11 concludes:

What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened.

This introduced a major theme of Romans 11. Israel is composed of two groups of Jewish people—those who embrace Jesus, and those who do not. The believing remnant embraces Jesus. The rest are hardened and are presently in unbelief. Romans 11:8-10 quotes three passages in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe the Jewish people who have not yet embraced Jesus as their Messiah.³

Is Israel's Unbelief Permanent?

What about the majority of Jewish people who have not yet embraced Jesus? Is their separation from God permanent, or is it temporary? What, if any, is the responsibility of Gentiles to evangelize the unbelieving portion of Israel?

Paul has already hinted at the answer to these questions in Romans 10. In verse 1, he stated that he was praying for the salvation of unbelieving Jewish people. If they were beyond the grace of God, it would be pointless to pray for their salvation. In verses 13-15, he indicated that Gentiles need to proclaim the gospel to them so that they may be saved by faith.⁴ This proclamation also would be pointless if Jewish people were beyond God's grace. In verse 19, Paul quoted Deuteronomy 32:21, stating that God would use Gentiles to provoke unbelieving Jewish people to jealousy.

What Paul suggested in Chapter 10, he made explicit in the rest of Romans 11.

Romans 11:11-15

- 11 I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.
- 12 Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!
- 13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,
- 14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.
- 15 For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

The first part of verse 11 makes it clear that Israel's unbelief is not permanent, stating:

“I say then, then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be!”

The Greek word translated “then” refers back to verses 8-10 concerning the majority of Jewish people who had not yet embraced Jesus. They would be lost and unable to see the truth. Paul asked, “They did not stumble as to fall, did they? The Greek word translated “fall” in this context indicates a fall from which no recovery is possible. Therefore, Paul was asking if Israel had fallen beyond recovery. Paul's answer, as in verse 1 was an emphatic “No!” in the strongest possible language. Their fall is definitely temporary. God plans to save many Jewish people.

The Calling of Gentile Believers to Evangelize the Jewish People

Romans 11:11b provides a major reason why salvation has come to the Gentiles.

But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them jealous.

The Greek word translated “transgression” in verse 11 is sometimes translated “fall.” However, in this case a different Greek word is used than the word translated “fall” in the first part of this verse. Here the word translated “transgression” means lapse, deviation, unintentional error or willful transgression, or false step.

The phrase, translated “to make them jealous” indicates purpose. Therefore, verse 11 states that God has saved Gentiles for the purpose of making the unbelieving portion of Israel jealous. Just as Jewish people were not to keep the Gospel to themselves but had a responsibility to bring the Good News to the Gentiles, likewise believing Gentiles are not to keep the Gospel to themselves (share it only with unbelieving Gentiles), but have the responsibility to live and communicate the Good News with unbelieving Jews. Gentiles were saved for precisely that purpose.

Unfortunately, for the most part, Gentile believers have declared the Good news to other Gentiles only and have not attempted to provoke Jewish people to jealousy. As a result, the Gospel has largely remained hidden from Jewish people. Even more tragic, some Gentiles, in the name of Jesus, have persecuted Jewish people and stripped the Gospel of its Jewish context. Thus, by and large, Gentiles, instead of provoking Jewish people to desire Jesus, have provoked them to resist Jesus.

Yet, Paul was clear--Gentiles were saved to provoke more Jews to be saved. Therefore, it should be the desire of every Gentile believer in Jesus to manifest such a transformed life that would provoke unbelieving Jewish people to believe in Jesus.

Verse 12 continues,

“Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be!”

The Greek word translated “transgression” is the same in both verse 11 and verse 12. In addition, the Greek word translated “much more” means a greater certainty or greater abundance, depending upon the context (e.g. Romans 5:8-10). Thus, if the lapse, deviation, or even willful transgression of the unbelieving part of Israel, resulted in great riches in Messiah for Gentiles, how much more abundantly will the Gentiles be blessed when the unbelieving part of the Jewish people embrace their Messiah!

This passage is a first class conditional statement. In this construction, the conditional clause (the protasis) literally means:

“Now if, and let us assume that it is true for the sake of argument, that their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles...”

However, in this case the condition is certain because Paul just declared, “But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles...” Because the condition is certain, Paul argued that his conclusion (the apodasis), is equally certain. Unbelieving Israel’s fulfillment will result in “much more” Gentiles embracing Jesus. The term “fulfillment” indicates that the unbelieving portion of Israel will be restored to God.

While Paul has been speaking to Gentiles throughout his letter to the Romans⁵ and in Romans 11, Paul now emphasizes that he is speaking specifically to Gentiles so that more Jewish people will be saved.

13 But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry,

14 if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them.

Paul was primarily called to reach Gentiles with the Good News of life in Jesus. He could only completely fulfill his ministry if he could persuade the Gentile believers to fulfill their God-given calling of reaching Jewish people. For the third time⁶, Paul stated that Gentiles are called to make Jewish people jealous. This would result in some Jewish people being saved.

Romans 11:15 tells us the result of this ministry of Gentiles to unbelieving Jews.

“For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

The Greek word translated “rejection” in verse 15 is used only two times in the Bible. The other time is in Acts 27:22, where Paul told the people on the ship in a storm that there would be no loss of life. It means “rejection” or, figuratively, “loss.”

While some have interpreted this statement to mean that God has rejected or cast away the Jewish people, this is impossible for two (2) reasons. First, Paul began his argument in Romans 11 by emphatically declaring that God will never reject Israel. His point in this entire chapter is precisely the opposite. He continually instructs the Gentile believers to provoke unbelieving Jews to jealousy, so that some may be saved.

Second, the construction of this phrase indicates that it is unbelieving Jewish people who rejected God, not vice-versa. The phrase “if their transgression” in verse 12 is parallel to “if their rejection” in verse 15. Both are in the same Greek form and convey the same idea. As “their transgression” refers to the unbelieving portion of Israel’s transgression of rejecting Jesus, “their rejection” refers to that same transgression.

As in verse 12, this argument is a first class conditional statement, which could more literally be translated:

“Now if, and let us assume that it is true for the sake of argument, that their rejection be the reconciliation of the world...”

However, as we have seen, in Romans 11:11b Paul stated that this condition is a certainty, a fact. Because the condition is certain, Paul’s conclusion is also certain. The unbelieving portion of Israel will accept the Lord, and their acceptance will be “life from the dead!” It appears that Paul was saying that, while unbelieving Israel rejection of the Lord brought reconciliation to Gentiles, Israel’s acceptance of the Lord will result in even far greater blessings upon Gentiles. An explosion of salvation awaits Gentiles after the unbelieving portion of Israel returns to God!

Here, for the second time, Paul indicated that unbelieving Israel will be restored to God.

The First Illustration: The Lump of Dough

To further explain the relationship of Gentiles to both the believing and unbelieving portions of Israel, Paul next used two illustrations. The first is a lump of dough.

Romans 11:16a

“And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also.”

The most common interpretation of this verse is that the first piece of dough represents the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Others believe that the first piece of dough represents Jesus⁷, while some view the firstfruits (first piece of dough) as the firstfruits of Pentecost.⁸

The word “and” relates this statement to the previous verse. Because Romans 11:15 says, “For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead,” the holy lump of dough refers to the future salvation of the unbelieving portion of the Jewish people.

“The first piece of dough” is the same word that is translated “firstfruit” or “firstfruits” in other passages. This analogy appears to be based on the following passage.

Numbers 15:17-21

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the sons of Israel, and say to them, 'When you enter the land where I bring you, then it shall be, that when you eat of the food of the land, you shall lift up an offering to the Lord. Of the first of your dough you shall lift up a cake as an offering; as the offering of the threshing floor, so you shall lift it up. From the first of your dough you shall give to the Lord an offering throughout your generations.' ”

In this passage, Moses was told to instruct the Israelites to offer the first of their dough to the Lord. They could not eat the rest of the dough/bread until this was done. The fact that the first piece was offered to God signified that the rest of the dough, from which it was taken, was also sanctified, and could now be eaten.

While there may be some question as to who is represented by the first piece or first piece of the dough in Romans 11:16a, the rest of the dough clearly represents the unbelieving portion of Jewish people. So, for the third time, Paul has indicated that God will save them, making them holy.

The Second Illustration: The Olive Tree and its Branches

The second illustration concerns the cultivated olive tree and its branches.

Romans 11:16b-17

16b ...and if the root be holy, the branches are too.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree,

The most commonly held view is that the root represents the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob from whom the Jewish nation was born. The Abrahamic Covenant is inseparately linked to this view. Others maintain that the root is Jesus, the consummate Jew.⁹

While the identity of the root can be disputed, verses 17 and 18 leave no doubt that the branches are the Jewish people. By stating that the branches are holy, for the fourth time, Paul indicated that the unbelieving portion of Israel will be saved.

In verse 17, Paul said that only *some* of the natural branches were broken off. Only *some* of the Jewish people are not on the tree. The believing remnant of Jewish people remains on the tree. Paul told the Gentile believers that they are a wild olive grafted in among the natural branches (believing Jews) and have become a partaker of the rich root of the olive tree. According to verse 17, the Gentile

believers were grafted in *among* the Jewish branches, *not in place* of them. Gentile believers have not replaced Israel, but have joined with them in the worship and service of God.

Three characteristics of a wild olive branch should be noted. First, it cannot produce any fruit no matter how hard it tries. Second, it cannot graft itself into a cultivated olive tree. Third, it is not natural for a wild olive branch to be grafted into a cultivated tree. Normally, a graft from a cultivated olive tree is placed into a wild tree to produce a cultivated fruit. In contrast, God supernaturally took wild, fruitless branches and grafted them into the cultivated tree. Only because of this, they can receive from the rich root of the cultivated olive tree, and bear fruit.

The Main Hindrance to Gentiles Evangelizing Jewish People

In Romans 11:18-24, Paul addressed a major hindrance to Gentile believers evangelizing the Jewish people. In verse 18, he identified the hindrance as “arrogance” toward the natural branches, the unbelieving portion of the Jewish people who had been broken off from the olive tree, saying:

“[D]o not be arrogant toward the branches; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you.

As Paul has done throughout much of his letter to the Romans, Paul again anticipated a logical response to his admonition, and then addressed that response.

19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in."

20 Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear;

21 for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you.

22 Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

The anticipated response of Gentiles to Paul’s admonition in verse 18 was, “We must be better than those Jewish unbelievers because we replaced them!”

In verses 20-22, Paul answered the Gentile believers’ anticipated response by acknowledging that, indeed, the natural branches were broken off because of unbelief, and informing the Gentile believers that they, likewise, are not exempt from the same consequences of unbelief.

In verses 23-24, Paul added that God is not finished with the unbelieving natural branches.

23 And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again.

24 For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (Emphasis added)

As in verses 12 and 15, the conditional argument in verse 24 is a first class conditional statement. The conditional clause technically means:

“For if, and let us assume that it is true for the sake of argument, that you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree ...”

However, in verse 17, Paul declared that the Gentiles were a wild olive branch grafted into a cultivated olive tree. Therefore the conditional statement in verse 24 is a fact. Because this condition is certain, Paul states that his conclusion is “much more” certain. The natural branches, which are now cut off, definitely will be grafted into their own olive tree. This is the fifth time in Romans 11 that Paul has indicated that the unbelieving portion of Israel will be restored to God.¹⁰

The Restoration of Israel

Next Paul explained unbelieving Israel’s spiritual restoration to the Gentile believers in more detail. Romans 11:25-27 states:

25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in;

26 and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob."

27 And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins."

Verse 25 points to a mystery that Paul is about to reveal. A mystery in Scripture is something that is hidden and cannot be understood unless it is revealed. A number of mysteries are revealed in the New Testament.¹¹ Paul actually began describing that mystery earlier in Romans 9, 10 and 11. The mystery is Israel’s partial hardening and restoration.

In verse 25, Paul stated that the reason he was revealing this mystery is so Gentile believers will not “be wise in their own estimation,” or arrogant toward Jewish unbelievers. In the passage, Paul reiterated his concern that Gentile arrogance hinders them from evangelizing Jewish people.

Paul then described interrelated parts of the mystery. First, a partial hardening has happened to Israel. Only some of Israel is in unbelief. The believing Jewish remnant remains. Second, this partial hardening of unbelieving Israel is not permanent. Third, It will end when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”

The Fullness of the Gentiles¹²

To understand when Israel’s partial hardening will end, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the phrase “the fullness of the Gentiles.” There are several schools of thought regarding the meaning of this phrase.¹³ A number of these views are based on the premise that “the fullness of the Gentiles” means “the full number of the Gentiles.” Some Bible translations translate it “full number of the Gentiles” or “complete number of the Gentiles.”¹⁴ However, an examination of the use of the

same Greek word translated “full number” throughout the New Testament and particularly in Romans, indicates that it has an entirely different meaning.

Paul used the same Greek word, *pleroma*, translated “full number”, 10 additional times, including three times in Romans, one of which is in Romans 11.¹⁵ The same word was used by Jesus four times in the Gospels.¹⁶ In none of these verses does *pleroma* mean “full number.” For example, twice we are told that the “fullness” of God dwells in Jesus.¹⁷ Ephesians 3:19 speaks of God’s “fullness.” 1 Corinthians 10:26 states that the earth is the Lord’s and the “fullness” thereof. Twice *pleroma* is used to describe the “fullness” of times.¹⁸ Ephesians 1:23 and 4:13 speak of the “fullness” of Jesus the Messiah.

Most relevant is Paul’s use of this word in his letter to the Romans. In Romans 13:10, he said that love is the “fulfillment” of the law. (Here *pleroma* is translated “fulfillment.”) In Romans 15:29, Paul spoke of the “fullness” of the blessing of Messiah. Thus, it appears this word consistently means “fullness” or “fulfillment” and not a “full number.”

Most significantly, *pleroma* was used another time in Paul’s argument in Romans 11. The first use of this word was in Romans 11:12, which says:

Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! (Emphasis added)

Here *pleroma* is translated “fulfillment” or “fullness” depending on the translation, and never “full number.” Paul was speaking of the fullness of the unbelieving part of Israel. Israel’s fullness will occur when the unbelieving portion of Israel embraces Messiah and brings this knowledge to the Gentile nations.¹⁹ It has nothing to do with a number.

While Romans 11:12 speaks of the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Jewish people, Romans 11:25 speaks of the fullness (*pleroma*) of the Gentiles. Both cases involve a contrast. The fullness of Israel is contrasted with unbelieving Israel’s transgression, failure or disobedience.²⁰ Its transgression is its rejection of Messiah. Its fullness will occur when it repents of its transgression, embraces Jesus as Messiah and brings greater blessings to the Gentiles. This is the fulfillment, or fullness, of Israel.

The fullness of the Gentiles is likewise contrasted with their transgression, failure or disobedience—their failure to embrace their calling to make Israel jealous. Instead, too often they have been arrogant against the unbelieving Jewish branches.²¹ Therefore, the “fullness of the Gentiles” will occur when they fulfill their calling to make the unbelieving portion of Israel so jealous that they will seek and receive Jesus as their Messiah and Lord. This is the fullness of the Gentiles.

All Israel Will Be Saved

Paul continued by plainly stating that all Israel will be saved.

Romans 11:26-27

26 and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”

27 “And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.”

Again, there are several views as to the meaning of “all Israel shall be saved.” One view is that Paul is referring to Israel’s deliverance from her enemies. However, the phrase is clarified by the rest of the passage, which says, “just as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.’ ” (Emphases added) In fact, the entire section, Romans 9 through 11, deals with Israel’s spiritual, not physical, condition. Therefore, “all Israel shall be saved” refers to Israel’s spiritual salvation from sin.

Others maintain that “all Israel” refers to the church. However, the church, by definition, is already saved. It makes no sense to proclaim that those who are already saved will become saved in the future. Furthermore, the unbelieving portion of Israel is distinguished from both the believing portion of Israel and Gentile believers (which, together, comprise the church) throughout Romans 11:11-32.

Still others hold that “all Israel” refers to Jewish believers. However, the Jewish believers are also, by definition, already saved. To declare that they will one day be saved is nonsensical. Also, they are distinguished from the unbelieving portion of Israel throughout Romans 11.

The passage and its context is straightforward. “All Israel will be saved” is speaking of the spiritual salvation of unbelieving portion of Israel. Paul plainly declared that they will turn from sin and unbelief to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. Other passages describe their salvation in more detail.²²

When the unbelieving portion of Israel joins the believing Jewish people in embracing Jesus as Messiah and Lord, the whole of Israel will be saved.

The Present State of the Unbelieving Portion of Israel

Beginning in Romans 11:28, Paul switched from describing the future of the unbelieving portion of Israel to their present state.

Romans 11:28-29

28 From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;

29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Paul stated that unbelieving Jewish people are enemies of the Gospel. In Romans 5:10, Paul used the same Greek word, *echthros*, to convey the fact that all believers were once God’s enemies. All unbelievers, including Jewish unbelievers, are enemies of the Gospel.

At the same time, Jewish unbelievers are beloved for the sake of their fathers, the patriarchs. By His sovereign choice, God promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that He would make their descendants His people (Genesis 17:7-8). God explained this in more detail in the New Covenant He made with their descendants, the Jewish people.²³

The word translated “beloved” in Romans 11:28 comes from “agape,” describing God’s unconditional and unfailing love. Unbelieving Jewish people are beloved of God right now! Therefore, to lightly esteem those whom Jesus wept over, died for, and is now seeking to save, is to place oneself in opposition to the promises and purposes of God.

Verse 29 states that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. The Greek word translated “irrevocable” means without repentance or regret. God does not regret his choices concerning the Jewish people. He will always love them, and He will fulfill all of his promises to them.

It is important to remember that the unbelieving Jewish people are beloved of God now, and that God is at work to save those He so loves now. One cannot rightfully say, “God will save them one day, so we can forget about them today and reach out only to Gentiles.” That attitude is in stark contrast to the heart and purposes of God.

The Five Stages of Spiritual History and Implications for Today

Romans 11:30-32

30 For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience,

31 so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy.

32 For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.

Here Paul mentioned four stages of spiritual history and implies a fifth.

1. Period of Gentile Disobedience

This began in Genesis 1, reached high points in Genesis 6 and 11, but continued until the Gospel was received by Gentiles in the Book of Acts.

2. Period of Jewish Disobedience

This began when the nation was formed at Mount Sinai, and reached its climax in the rejection of Jesus and his messengers in the first century.

3. Period of Mercy on Millions of Gentiles

This began when the Gospel was received by the Gentiles in the Book of Acts and continues to the present time.

4. Period of Mercy on the Unbelieving Portion of Jewish People

This began at Pentecost and will reach its ultimate fulfillment when the unbelieving portion of Israel is saved.

5. Period of “Life from the Dead” for Gentiles

This is specifically described in verse 15 and will occur after Israel is saved en masse.

In these three (3) verses, the word “mercy” is used four (4) times. The Greek word translated “mercy” indicates the need for help in a miserable situation. When people are without God, or are disobedient to Him, they are in a most miserable situation. Paul reminds Gentile believers that once they were disobedient to God. But they have received God’s mercy as a result of the disobedience of

most of Israel. Today, most of Israel is disobedient. But they may now receive God's mercy as a result of the mercy shown to and through Gentiles.

While some translations omit the word "now" in verse 31, it appears that it was in the original text. In addition, it fits Paul's context. First, he had been describing the present condition of Jewish people.²⁴ Second, he had been encouraging the Gentiles in Rome to fulfill their calling to provoke Jewish people to jealousy and be saved as a result (verses 11-14). Thus, it makes perfect sense for Paul to encourage the Gentile believers to show God's mercy to Jewish people "now" so some of them will be saved at the present time.

It is clear that Jewish people can be saved now. It is also clear that, as Gentile believers fulfill their calling to communicate God's mercy to Jewish people through their lives and testimony, Jewish people will receive Jesus as their Messiah and Lord.

Verse 32 concludes this section by saying that God has shut up both Jews and Gentiles in disobedience so he can have mercy on both of them. The Greek word translated "shut up" conveys the idea of being hopelessly in prison, or being like fish trapped in a net.²⁵ Without Messiah, both Jews and Gentiles are in a hopeless situation. God desires to have mercy on all through Jesus.

Contrary to the view of some that Jewish evangelism should be left exclusively to Jewish believers, throughout Romans 11:11-31 Paul made precisely the opposite case. Gentile believers are called to be instruments of God to bring Jewish people to faith in Jesus now.

Resulting Praise to God

Romans 11:33-36 concludes this marvelous chapter with praise for God's unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways.

33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!

34 For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?

35 Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?

36 For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him (be) the glory forever. Amen.

Romans 11 reveals one of God's "unfathomable ways." Gentiles have been saved and called to provoke Jewish people to jealousy so they may be saved. May Gentiles soon fulfill their purpose of evangelizing Jewish people.

¹ See, for example, Acts 4:4, 21:20.

² See Romans 9:27, quoting Isaiah 10:20-22, Isaiah 28:5, Jeremiah 50:20, Ezekiel 6:8-10; Zephaniah 3:12-17, and Zechariah 8:6-8.

³ Isaiah 29:10, Deuteronomy 29:4, and Psalm 69:22-23.

⁴ Romans 10:15 quotes Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of Gentiles proclaiming the Good News to Jewish people, announcing salvation, saying to Zion, “Your God reigns.”

⁵ See, for example, Romans 1:13 and 11:13. Throughout Romans 11, Paul is speaking to Gentiles, referring to the Jewish people in the third person.

⁶ See Romans 10:19, 1:11, and 11:14.

⁷ Reasons for this view include: 1) Jesus is the firstfruits from the dead (Acts 2:23, 1 Cor. 15:20); He alone is holy; and Our faith and life flows from Him.

⁸ One of the Biblical names for Pentecost is “firstfruits” (Numbers 28:26). The 3,000 Jewish believers saved at that time can be considered the firstfruits of the harvest of souls into Messiah’s kingdom. To those who hold this view, the fact that the Jewish believers were the firstfruits of the harvest demonstrates that the rest of the Jewish harvest is sure to come.

⁹ The term “root” is applied to Jesus in a number of Biblical passages. Jesus is the root from Jesse, the root out of dry ground and the root of David. (Isaiah 11:10, 53:2; Rev. 5:5, 22:16). In Romans 15:12, quoting Isaiah 11:10, Paul applies the same word translated “root” in Revelation to Jesus. Jesus alone was holy, and it is his holiness that He gives to His followers (1 Cor. 1:30). This view comports well with John 15:4-5. Jesus is the vine, the root from which life flows.

¹⁰ This does not mean that every Jewish person is automatically saved. In verses 11, 13-14, he says that he desires for Gentiles to provoke Jewish people to emulation, so some might be saved. Any Jewish person who remains in unbelief remains cut off from the tree.

¹¹ The mysteries revealed in the New Testament include: Gentiles becoming fellow heirs and partakers of God’s promise in Messiah, known as the mystery of the Body (Ephesians 3:3-12), the mystery of Messiah and His Bride, the church (Ephesians 5:22-32), the mystery of Messiah dwelling in believers (Colossians 1:24-2), the mystery of the translation, or rapture (1 Corinthians 15:50-58), the mystery of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands (Revelation 1:20), the mystery of the kingdom of God (explained in numerous parables), and the satanic mystery, including the mystery of Babylon (Rev. 17), the mystery of lawlessness (2Thess 2:1-12), and the defeat of the satanic mystery (Revelation 10:1-7).

¹² Much of the material in this section is from Sam Nadler, Messianic Foundations, Word of Messiah Ministries, 2010, pages 113-199, “Jewish Evangelism and Discipleship, Article 5” and other writings by the same author.

¹³ One view maintains that the church is the new Israel. To those who hold this view, the fullness of the Gentiles refers to the glory of the church, and is the same as all Israel being saved (verse 26). However, throughout Romans 11, Paul has consistently distinguished between the salvation of the Jewish people and the salvation of the Gentiles. In addition, Paul has stated that the church has not replaced Israel, and that God’s purposes for Israel remain (see Romans 11:1-2, 5, 7, 11, 15-24). Furthermore, Romans 11:25 indicates that the unbelieving portion of Israel will be saved *after* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. So they cannot be one and the same.

Another view holds that after the last Gentile is saved (when the final number of Gentiles has “come in”, the church will then be raptured, and then God will begin working to save the Jewish people. However, as will be seen throughout Romans 11, God is continually at work to save both Jews and Gentiles. (See, for example, Romans 11:5, 16-17, 30-32. See also the entire Book of Acts, throughout which the Holy Spirit is at work to save both Jews and Gentiles, and Romans 10:1, 11-15 and Ephesians 2:11-17.) In addition, since the restoration of Israel results in life from the dead for Gentiles (Romans 11:15), it appears that many more Gentiles will be saved *after* the Jewish people return en masse to God. This view does not appear to account for these factors..

A third view holds that the fullness of the Gentiles is same as “the times of the Gentiles fulfilled” of Luke 21:24. While this view may seem to be plausible, it does not fit the context of Paul’s teaching to the Gentiles in Romans 11 in two respects. First, in Luke, it appears that “the times of the Gentiles” involves their physical or political rule over Israel, Jerusalem and the Jewish people. However, all of Romans 9 through 11 deals with Israel’s spiritual, not physical, condition. Second, in Luke 21:24, the fullness of the times of the Gentiles deals with their judgment. Romans 11:25, as will be seen below, deals with their obedience.

¹⁴ These translations included the NIV, TNIV, CEB, CSB, LEB, NIRV, GNT and NLT.

¹⁵ Romans 11:12; 13:10; 15:29, 1 Corinthians 10:26; Galatians 4:4, Ephesians 1:9-10,22-23; 3:17-19; 4:11-13; Colossians 1:19; 2:9.

¹⁶ Matthew 9:16; Mark 2:21, 8:18-29; John 1:15-16.

¹⁷ Colossians 1:19 and 2:9.

¹⁸ Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:10.

¹⁹ Genesis 12:3; 17:8; Isaiah 60:3; Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:38-39; Ezekiel 36:24-28; Zechariah 8:22-23, etc.

²⁰ Romans 11:12, 15 and 30.

²¹ Romans 11:17-18.

²² See, for example, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 36:25-29 and Zechariah 12:10-13:1; 13:8-9.

²³ Jeremiah 31:33-34, describes the New Covenant God would make with the Jewish people, saying,

33 "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

34 And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Emphasis added)

²⁴ The word "now" appears in the Authorized Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, the New International Version, the English Revised Version and other translations. However, some excellent manuscripts do not contain "now." One includes "later" instead of "now." A Student's Guide to New Testament Textual Variants states.

"Although it is possible that "now" or "later" was added here by copyists to balance the "now in the first phrase, it is more likely that copyists who noticed that the Jews (although they could have) did not in fact obtain mercy at the time of Paul's writing either changed "now" to "later" or omitted the word."

²⁵ See Luke 5:6, which uses this same word regarding fish in a net.