

All Israel will be Saved, but Not All Israel

By [Joel McDurmon](#) | Published: January 7, 2011

In response to my views on [Jerusalem and the Mother of Harlots in Revelation 17](#), some readers expressed their predictable denial. God would never write off ethnic and physical Jerusalem in that way, they say, because He made an eternal covenant with Abraham and his seed. One reader objected thusly:

You are forgetting about God’s promise to Abraham, which is eternal in nature. God made a covenant “between me and thee forever.” Either God meant forever, or He did not. Yes, the Jews have been disobedient literally for centuries in denying Christ, but they will be restored in a total and comprehensive manner at the Second Coming. This is why Paul was very clear on the subject in Romans 11, to make sure that our liberty in Christ does not give reason to be boastful:

He then quotes Romans 11:31–34. Verses 31–32 are the relevant part here; they read: “Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy. For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.”

The commenter wishes to emphasize the “them” for us. He adds, “Note verse 32. It refers that God, ‘hath concluded them [Jews] all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.’” Thus, he sees the “them” as referring exclusively to the Jews—he even edits it in just so we don’t miss the point.



Unfortunately, the “them [Jews]” interpretation is questionable at best. It is based upon a misunderstanding of an unhelpful translation (which, in this case, is the KJV). The word “them” does not directly appear in the Greek texts. The Greek word for “all” here does not carry any personal pronoun, but rather a definite article. Were we to translate it in a wooden literal fashion, it would say “the all.” But this common feature of Greek is simply smoothed into proper English as “all.” Why the KJV added to “them” the text is not clear. It is a totally unnecessary addition to God’s word.

For this reason, nearly all modern translations leave it out. The ESV translates verse 32: “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.” The NAS reads, “For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.” Even the ancient Latin Vulgate got it right, rendering the Greek “*tous pantas*” as simply “*omnia*,” or “all.”

So the emphasis upon “all Jews” as special objects of God’s mercy evaporates with a clear understanding of the text itself.

What then does the text mean? The emphasis of this verse is properly on God’s mode of salvation being *mercy*, and thus that whether one is a Jew or a Gentile, they all may be saved. God does not play favorites, and God does not go back on his promises. All men are in prison to sin, and all men can only be saved by God’s mercy. Despite the Jews remaining in unbelief for the time (the time that Paul was writing) and God opening and turning His mercy to the Gentiles, nevertheless He had not thereby cast away the Jewish people altogether. They may also return to God through His mercy. This simply

reiterates the main argument Paul had started already in chapter 9 (really chapter 2, but that much of the argument would require considerably more space to cover than I wish to take here).

Consider the comment with which Paul begins chapter 11: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” He had just finished mentioning how Israel continually rejected God, while God revealed himself and was found by those who did not seek him (Gentiles; see 10:20–21). In light of this, Paul sees it as necessary to head off the possible retort that God has completely rejected Israel while turning to open His mercy to the rest of the world. Paul uses himself as proof that this is going too far: he himself is an ethnic Jew, a physical child of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin, and yet he is not only a believer and saved but an apostle, a teacher of believers. So he is living proof that God still shows mercy to ethnic Israelites.

But the question that arises from modern Zionists, dispensationalists, and others who wish to see some form of restored physical Israel and temple, is whether God intends to save the whole physical nation of Israelites in the future. Does Paul’s argument that “all Israel will be saved” pertain to physical, ethnic Israel?

I think the context makes that impossible.

The Remnant Principle

Since individual personal experience is not enough to prove a doctrinal point, Paul turns to the only infallible rule, Holy Scripture. As Scriptural support for his ability to be saved yet as a Jew, Paul does not provide support for the view that all (or even most) physical Jews will be saved. Rather, he references the account of Elijah and the tiny remnant of faithful people God preserved. He teaches, in reference to God’s people, the *remnant principle*:

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.” But what is God’s reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal” (Rom. 11:2–4). (See 1 Kings 19:10, 18.)

In verse 5, Paul directly compares his situation with the remnant principle found in Elijah: “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.” Due to the comparison, the Greek is more pointed than the ESV says. It more emphatically says, “In the same way, and in the present time. . . .” In other words, Paul is drawing a direct parallel between the tiny remnant of Israelites saved in those former times and the conversion he expects now. “Just like then, but now” was the essence of his point.

The main principle at work here is God’s election, not Israelite ethnicity or bloodline. Paul does not want us to miss this, so he clearly emphasizes this aspect in the very next verses: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened” (Rom. 11:6–7).

This phrase, “The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,” provides a key to what Paul is trying to teach throughout the book of Romans. From these two principles—election and remnant—we must deduce two things about physical Israelites. First, salvation is based purely on God’s gracious election. This is indisputable. Therefore, only that remnant of elect Jews are saved. Secondly, since “the rest” of

the non-remnant “hardened” Jews are contrasted with the elect, therefore some (most) Jews are not saved.

Notice, in light of this, that Paul does not simply say “God has not rejected his people,” but rather, He has not rejected His people *whom he foreknew*.” Among the mass of Israelites past, present, and future, God foreknew some unto salvation. These foreknown (and therefore elected and predestined ones (Rom. 8:29)) God has not rejected. But the rest, including every non-elect, unbelieving Jew, he has hardened and rejected. God only saves those whom he specially foreknew, whether Jew or Gentile.

Paul references the remnant principle as an answer to the question whether God has rejected Israelites. The issue is election. Following the logic of this argument forces us backward into the previous chapters. The issue of the salvation of Israel heads up chapter 10: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved.” That chapter ends with Israel rejecting and being rejected by God. Then follows chapter 11:1–7 with which we have just dealt, and which returns us to the doctrine of election. In order to hear the beginning of this doctrine in relation the salvation of Israel, we must jump back yet another chapter and begin at 9:3. The issue of election brings the context of chapter 11 within the larger context of chapters 9 and 10 (especially 9), of which one could argue that most of chapter 11 is merely a subhead or even a codicil.

Election and the Remnant

In Romans 9:3, Paul effuses, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” He is clearly including ethnic “flesh” Israel, and he desires their salvation. He then spells out God’s gifts to this Israel: “They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen” (9:4–5). It is clear that salvation is “of the Jews” as Jesus put it (John 4:22). Therefore, it is clear that Paul thinks the promises of God yet apply to Israel.

Why then was not all of Israel saved and believing now that Christ had come? This was the obvious question to which Paul immediately responded, for his next words assume the issue: “But it is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6). Now why would anyone think that the word of God had failed? Only if they thought all ethnic Israelites were indeed saved due to God’s election of “Israel.” If so, the obvious fact (then and now) that so many Israelites reject Christ and disbelieve would mean that God’s promise to save them had failed. Indeed, according to an ethnic Israel view, if only a single ethnic Israelite failed to believe on Christ then God’s word would have failed. But Paul says it has not failed. Why not? Because *the issue is election, not ethnicity*.

Paul therefore immediately adds the most important qualifier, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel” (9:6, ESV). The Greek is curt and the syntax is a bit difficult here. The KJV gets closer: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” I think, however, that the original is more literally rendered: “For not all these from Israel are Israel.” The point, in any case, is to show that not all Israelites (physical, ethnic) are actually elect Israel (true Israel, of some even say “spiritual” Israel).

Paul expands this argument for the primacy of election. Not all Israel is true Israel, and “and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (9:7). He finds proof simply from two Old Testament instances of election: Isaac and Ishmael, and Jacob and Esau. He explains,

“Through Isaac [not Ishmael] shall your offspring be named.” This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. For this

is what the promise said: “About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.” And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:7–13).

Thus we must conclude, as we did from Paul’s argument in chapter 11:1–7, that it is not physical ethnicity that determines the scope of the fulfillment of God’s promise, but God’s own election. Election is the primary issue. And on this issue, Paul spends the next several verses.

A review of the next few verses reveals that Paul here develops and proves the same themes that he carries through the end of chapter 11 (and really the end of the book). The doctrine of election in the way Paul has so far described it raises a question. Paul uses this obvious question to assert the themes:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills (Rom. 9:13–18).

He gives us three primary themes: God’s choice, mercy, and hardening. And after a brief bit of teaching about God’s right and power to make those ultimate determinations (9:19–23), Paul argues that God has opened election and glory to Gentiles as well as a *remnant* of Jews (9:23–26), yet also that a *large portion of the children of Israel will not be saved*. For this he quotes from Isaiah 10:22: “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved,” (Rom. 9:27). Of all the millions of ethnic children of Abraham, God would only save a remnant.

This is God’s choice, for “Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness. For the Lord God of hosts will make a full end, as decreed, in the midst of all the earth” (Is. 10:22–23), and “the Lord will carry out his sentence upon the earth fully and without delay” (Rom. 9:28; Is. 28:22). For these “sons of Israel” excluded from the remnant, destruction is decreed. More on this later.

Thus when Paul arrives again at the remnant principle in chapter 11, he exhibits these same themes. Just as in Elijah’s time (and we may assume as in Isaiah’s time as well), “So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.” “Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened” (Rom. 11:6–7).” In other words, God “has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills” (Rom. 9:18). He chose the remnant for mercy, and the rest of the Israelites for hardening.

So as not all of “Israel” is true Israel, we must understand that God never intended to save all ethnic Jews, and according to the principle of the remnant, He never really intended to save them in mass, but only a few. Paul expected this same principle to continue in his day.

Yet according to the principle of the remnant, Paul knew for a fact that God had not completely shut the door to Israelites. Thus, while he did not expect a huge massive conversion, he did expect to save some. He says this explicitly: “Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save *some of them*” (Rom. 11:13–14).

All Israel

How in the world, then, can Paul go on later to say that “All Israel will be saved” (11:26)? *All Israel*? It is clear from the unity of the argument in chapters 9 through 11 that “Israel” in 11:26 *cannot mean all ethnic physical Israel*, but must refer to elect Israel. Since Paul has labored for almost three whole chapters to establish, define, and prove the doctrine of election with special regard to Israel, to show that a vast majority of Israelites never received election but were hardened, to argue for a saved *remnant* for his day just like in Elijah’s, to say that Israel has not obtained it but only the election has, we must therefore conclude that *not* all of ethnic Israel will be saved.

But while we know for a fact that not all of ethnic Israel will be saved, we also know for a fact that the elect remnant of true Israel has indeed obtained God’s mercy, and therefore *all* of elect Israel shall be saved. Therefore, we can only understand this verse rightly to be using the term Israel just as Paul did in his paradoxical-sounding passage in Romans 9:6—elect Israel, the Israel of the promise. “Not all these from [ethnic] Israel are [elect] Israel,” and therefore not all ethnic Israel will be saved; but, “All [elect] Israel will be saved.”

So, all Israel shall be saved, but not all Israel. Get it?

But many interpreters and commentators see a hindrance to this exegesis in the preceding verse. It says, “Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Rom. 11:25). Here, Paul has just used the word “Israel” in contradistinction to the word “Gentiles.” Thus, many will reason, he must have had *ethnic* Israel in mind, for that’s the only way in which Israel stands in contrast to “Gentiles.” It is then assumed that this distinction carries through into verse 26, where “*all* Israel will be saved”; and this must therefore mean that all ethnic Israel will be saved.

Nevertheless, some have explicitly dismissed the connection between Romans 11:26 and 9:6. Even some Reformed interpreters argue that this cannot be the soundest interpretation. John Murray, in his classic commentary on Romans, does just this by assuming a necessary connection between verses 25 and 26 as I described above.

I do not have time yet to address Murray’s arguments in detail. Suffice it for now to say that while they represent a strong attempt to present the old future Israel view, I nevertheless find them unconvincing and flawed. Part of this, I think, stems from an attempt on his part to get as close as possible to the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 191) doctrine of a future calling of the Jews and the fullness of the gentiles as part of the coming of God’s Kingdom. I think, therefore, that on this point he was more subservient to the man-made confession than to the strict text of Scripture. But this is speculation.

Murray argues the exact opposite as I have above: he says that “Israel” in 11:26 absolutely cannot refer to elect Israel as opposed to all national Israel. In short, I think this is partly a false dichotomy. Since Paul spends the whole of chapters 9–11 arguing for both the election of gentiles *and* a remnant of elect Israel, Romans 11:26 can easily refer to *both* ethnic Jews as opposed to gentiles, and yet *only* elect Israel as “All Israel” because only elect Israel, Paul has already established, is really Israel.

More importantly, and more simply, there is no reason that 11:26 has any necessary relation to 11:25. It seems more natural to me that 11:1–25 stands as one long, complex argument to the question asked in verse 1, “Has God rejected his people?” Paul essentially reiterates the question in verse 11 showing continuity of thought through the arguments in those verses. This question and its answer come as part

of the larger context that began in 9:3, and the controlling theme overall is God's free election and grace as the basis for all salvation. 11:26 begins the conclusion to that larger context.

I hope in the near future to address Murray's views further as well as add further background to the remnant principle drawn from the prophecies of Isaiah 11. I plan also to add the historical context and show why the Jew-Gentile issue seems to drive the whole book of Romans.



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