

Lesson 31: A Remnant May Be Saved (11:1-24)

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

Maurice W. Lusk, III

Israel May Yet Be Saved (11:1-32)

A Remnant of Israel Is Presently Being Saved (11:1-6)

I ask then: Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. ²God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah--how he appealed to God against Israel: ³"Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me" (1 Kings 19:10,14) ? ⁴And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (1 Kings 19:18) ⁵So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. ⁶And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace

It is important for us to keep in mind the tension that, no doubt, existed between the Jewish Christians and Gentiles who had become Christians during the first and second generation of Christianity. There is no evidence to justify the assumption, or even a reason to think, that those of the Jewish community of the first century would have broken themselves off or pulled away from the Jewish community of which they were a part: its synagogues, Sabbath Day observance, kosher food laws, circumcision, the Jewish Feast Days, etc. This becomes all the more evident from the efforts

that were made in the late first century by the rabbinic community of the Jamnia *yeshevia* to purge all Christians from their synagogues. This was an undertaking of the newly established Sanhedrin (consisting primarily of rabbis) led by Gamaliel II, following the destruction of Jerusalem.

In chapters 9-11, Paul is dealing with an attitude existing between these two contingents of the church at Rome. His words here are not “forthtellings” or prophetic utterances of future events, such as a fixed number of Gentiles who will enter into the kingdom of God before the Jews can be ushered in by fiat of God, as is taught in some millennial theologies. Rather, Paul is addressing a more immediate problem which had resulted from concerns about the role of Israel in the redemption God had effected here on earth through the new creation existence brought about by the resurrection of Christ. Where were the Jews in all this? Were they at the heart of it or were they not even a part of it?

Paul’s argument that the Jewish community, at large, was estranged from God because of their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth must have caused considerable concern on the part of the Jewish contingent of believers in Rome. These concerns are what this whole section (Romans 9-11) is about.

Paul here returns to a *midrash* style exegesis and develops a line of argumentation centering on the concept of a "remnant of Israel" who will be saved. He introduced this concept at Rom 9:27-28,

*Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only **the remnant** (hupoleimma – to leave behind) will be saved.²⁸ For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality."**11 Isaiah 10:22,23]** ²⁹It is just as Isaiah said previously: "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants (sperma - a seed, survivors, a remnant), we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah."*

He then picks this theme up again in 11:1, identifying himself as a part of this “remnant,” illustrates his point with the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 19, and the “seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal,” then says, in verse 27, “So too, at the present time there is **a remnant** (*leimma* - a small residue [from *leipo* - to leave behind]) chosen by grace.”

There is a body of tradition behind this concept. As mentioned, Paul recalls the Elijah tradition of 1 Kings 19, but his argument concerning a remnant from Israel that will be delivered is more specifically rooted in the book of Isaiah. In fact, Paul's quote in Romans 9:29, "unless the Lord had left us a remnant," is from Isaiah 1:9, and this theme is repeated throughout Isaiah 1-37, in fifteen different occurrences (1:9; 10:20-22; 11:11, 16; 14:22, 30; 15:9; 16:14; 15:3; 37:4, 31-32), in addition to the reference in 46:3, which is within the "Servant Songs" block of Isaiah 40-53, with specifically messianic themes.

The "Remnant" Tradition

The remnant prophecies were believed by their original recipients to be a promise of God to return the Jews of the Assyrian captivity (722 BC) and the Judean Jews of the Babylonian captivity (586 BC) back to Palestine (Judea). The Jews of the first century used these texts to teach that God had promised to bring all Diaspora Judaism back to the homeland. Paul uses the language and imagery of these texts to say that a remnant of the Jews will become followers of Jesus of Nazareth. These remnant texts are as follows:

*In that day **the remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob, will no longer rely on him who struck them down but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.**²¹ **A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God.**²² Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, **only a remnant will return.** Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous (Isaiah 10:20-22).*

*In that day the Lord will reach out his hand a second time **to reclaim the remnant that is left of his people from Assyria, from Lower Egypt, from Upper Egypt, from Cush,[That is, the upper Nile region], from Elam, from Babylonia, from Hamath and from the islands of the sea** (Isaiah 11:11).*

*For **out of Jerusalem will come a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors.** The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this (Isaiah 37:32).*

Why a Jewish Remnant Now?

Christianity was born in the cradle of Judaism. The earliest Christians were Jews. It is a curiosity that, at the time of the writing of the Roman letter (57-58 AD), this Jewish apostle would be speaking of Jewish Christians as “a remnant.” In round figures, the church was exclusively Jewish during the first generation (from about 30 to 50 AD). From 50 to 70 AD (the second generation) the church began to look both Jewish and Gentile. From 70 AD on, however, the Gentile converts increased and Jewish converts decreased. From the third generation on, the church became predominately Gentile. By the end of the first century the church appears to have been almost exclusively Gentile.

One of the primary reasons for this shift from Jew to Gentile in the development of the first century church has to do with changes in the religion of Judaism, resulting from the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish Temple in 70 AD. With this event, the Sadducees, the Zealots, and the Essences fell from sight. Most of them were slaughtered by the Roman army, under the Roman General Titus. The Pharisees were the only remaining viable sect of the Jews; you could say that they were “a remnant” of Judaism’s leadership.

The reason for the exclusivism of this party has to do with one rabbinic figure called Johanna Ben Zakkai. During the 66-70 AD siege of the city of Jerusalem, the Zealots (a party of Jewish terrorists) had pushed Rome to the determination to destroy every Jew in Judea. The political figures of Judaism had escaped the city in the custody of the Roman army. The leaders of the Zealots had broadcasted to every one throughout the besieged city that every Jew must remain in the city and die with her in martyrdom (as did the Zealots of Masada). The Pharisees and the synagogue community had no desire to die for the Temple when the Sadducees were the party in charge of it.

The exodus of this group from Jerusalem was arranged by Rabbi Ben Zakkai. He faked his death and had his disciples put him in a coffin and take him outside the city for burial. Once out of the reach of the Zealots, he made his way to General Vespasian, presented the desire of the rabbinic community to leave the city and go to Jamnia and establish a *yeshevia* for the preservation of the history of the Jewish people.

This request was granted and the Romans preserved the rabbinic community and their vast library of Hebrew scrolls were transported to

Jamnia following the destruction of Jerusalem. None of the people Ben Zakkai requested by kept alive were priests, only those identified with the synagogue – “the *Beth Sepher*.” Thus the trustees and scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures became the replacement for the sacrificial cultus of the Temple. With these events, the synagogue became the central institution of the Jewish religion, and the consensus of the rabbis was that it must be purged and strengthened if Judaism as a religion were to be saved for future generations.

Part of this purging resulted in the expulsion of “the heretics;” the chief of these being those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah. One of the rabbis Ben Zakkai had specifically asked for was Gamaliel II, who became the head (*Nasi*) of the newly established Sanhedrin Council. This group quickly determined the canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures and added to the traditional synagogue prayers, called *The Eighteen Benedictions*, a curse on those they called, “*ha minim*,” the heretics.

There are numerous rabbinic tractates (e.g., *Birkat Ha-minim*) on the removal of the “*ha minim*,” whom they called the *notzrim* – the Nazarenes (later “Christians”). The Jewish Christians of this period likely continued to be a part of the synagogue and also met with others who believed Jesus to be the Messiah. The purging of the synagogues during this period reduced the Jews who were a part of the movement of Christianity to a very small number. By the beginning of the second century, the church was, for the most part, made up primarily of Gentiles; hence, Paul’s comments on the redemption of a remnant of Israel.

(2) *The Remainder Are Hardened of Heart*
"According to the Scriptures" (11:7-10)

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, ⁸as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." [Deut. 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10] ⁹And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. ¹⁰May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever, [Psalm 69:22,23].

Why did God harden Israel's heart? The more correct question would be, "How did God harden Israel's heart?" God hardened Israel's heart the same way Jesus made Israel outraged or indignant; namely, by confrontation. It was God confronting Israel with his will in the face of their opposing will which resulted in their attitude of hardening or obstinacy. The word Paul uses for "hardening" is *poroo*, which means, "to petrify, to turn to stone, become insensitive or not impressible."

This is what God had done to Israel in the time of Isaiah. Throughout the book of Isaiah, God confronted Israel again and again with their lack of regard for him and his word. They had become petrified in heart, insensitive, or unimpressible in terms of God's will. God, then, gave them up to their choice, as Paul says he did with the Gentiles in Rom 1:18-32.

Israel Remains the Same in Their Resistance to Jesus as the Messiah

It is a sad commentary on the Jewish people, but one that must be made. These people are still where they were when Jesus uttered the words of Matt 13:14-15,

In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them," (Isaiah 6:9-10)

As Paul identified Israel in the first century, so are they today:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³²Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." ³³As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame" [Isaiah 8:14; 28:16]. ¹⁰Brothers, my heart's desire

and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Israel sought to establish its own righteousness through pursuit of *Torah*. So is it today. Perhaps, the words of one of Judaism's greatest spokesman, speaking some 1,200 years after their rejection of their Messiah, tell us the same story. It is truly the case that they loved *Torah* more than the very presence of God himself.

Moses Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, usually referred to as Maimonides, was one of the towering figures in medieval intellectual and religious life. The author lived from 1138 to 1204. He spent ten full years compiling the *Mishnah Torah* (an enumeration of the 613 precepts of the *Torah*), which he continued to revise throughout his lifetime. Though born in Spain, in his youth his family fled religious persecution, settling in Cairo, Egypt.

In the *Mishnah Torah* he writes

Every Jew is obligated to study Torah, whether he is poor or rich, healthy or ill, young or old. Even if he is a pauper who derives his livelihood from charity, or if he has family obligations to his wife and children, he must still establish fixed times for Torah study -- both day and night, as it says (Joshua 1:8), "You shall think about it day and night"

The great Sages of Israel included woodchoppers, water drawers and blind men. Despite these [difficulties], they were occupied with Torah study day and night, and were amongst those who transmitted Torah in the unbroken chain dating back to Moses (Mishnah Torah, "Laws of Torah Study," 1:8-9).

In 3:7 of the *Mishnah Torah*, he writes,

Perhaps one will say: "[I will interrupt my studies] until after I make

money, and then I will return and study [I will interrupt my studies] until after I buy what I need and can focus less on my business. Then I will return and study. If you think like this, you will never merit the Crown of Torah. Rather, make your work provisional and your Torah study permanent. Do not say: When I have free time, I will study," for perhaps you will never have free time. (Mishnah Torah, "Laws of Torah Study," 3:7).

(3) *The Hardening of Israel Opened the Door to the Gentiles (11:11-24)*

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.¹² 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!¹³ I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry¹⁴ in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches.¹⁷ 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 . . . (11:11-17).

Paul here moves his attention from Israel to the Gentiles. It is not the case that one must be of Hebrew descent before he can become ego centered in his faith and set himself and his will against the will of God. Paul insists that the Jew have not fallen beyond recovery; but because of their present resistance to Jesus and his messianic identity, a door for the Gentiles has been opened. It was originally Israel's responsibility to enlighten the Gentiles with knowledge of their God, *Yehweh* (cf., Deut 4:5-8). They were to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 62:2; 66:19), but they had regarded the Gentiles as unworthy of fellowship with the elect of God. They did tolerate a Gentile to become a proselyte, but this did not make him a Jew. He was not allowed into the court of Israel in the Temple of Jerusalem, nor could he sit among the people of Israel or read from the Scrolls in the Synagogue services. Those Gentiles who desired to learn of God, those call "godfearers" in the book of Acts, we only allowed to join in the worship of

the Jews from a distance, being relegated to a specific location within the synagogue where they were kept separated from the men of Israel (cf., Eph 2:12-13).

How different things had become now. Those who were considered unworthy to sit in the midst of the Jews were now called by God, “my people,” and “the elect” (i.e., those “in Christ”). In all of his letters Paul called them, “*hoi hagioi*,” “the holy ones” or “saints.” This situation, in the thinking of Paul, would bring about a jealousy on the part of the Jews, and cause them to return to God, on God’s terms, accept the Messiah God had sent to them, regain favor with God, and reclaim their place as his chosen people along with the Gentiles who had become sons of Abraham through faith. When this happened the whole of God’s redeemed people would be richer for the coming of the Jews into the kingdom of God. But something about the ongoing tension between the Gentile Christians of Rome and their Jewish brethren moved Paul to the following warning,

do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²²Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴After all, if 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 grafted into their own olive tree! (11:18-24).

What happened to Israel can happen to the Gentiles as well. It doesn’t appear that Paul wants these people to feel that once they have become God’s people they will always be God’s people, or once saved always saved. He appears to know nothing of a doctrine of eternal security. God’s kindness is promised if they continue to remain in his kindness. “Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God,” Paul says, “sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness, otherwise, you also will be cut off,” (11:22).

If the Gentile contingent of the church at Rome allowed themselves to become elitist, self-righteous, legalistic, and insensitive to God's will, they would be cut off as well. Israel's sin was ego-centered arrogance. They had set their will against the will of God and had made themselves *porosis* (stonish or hardened) in their resistance. Paul wants the church at Rome to learn something from what has happened to Israel – you can't say "no" to God and you can't change his mind by stubborn resistance to his will, no matter how many centuries it the stubborn resistance lasts.

MWLIII