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The Coming Kingdom and the Hope of Israel

Calvin L. Smith

KEYWORDS:

| The Kingdom of God | Israel | Romans | Hope |
| Eschatology | Biblical Theology | Day of the Lord | Zion |

ABSTRACT:

The purpose of this paper is to set out a case for the hope of Israel in the eschatological future. The primary focus in this paper is Romans, the climax of the Apostle Paul's discussion and argument concerning ethnic Israel in Romans 9-11, in addition this is framed by drawing on other biblical texts. The aim is to set the scene — and provide a summary in terms of biblical theology — for the case for God's calling and purpose for the Jewish people, with a special focus on the eschatological place of Israel as set out in Romans 11. In so doing we will establish precise contextual definitions for key terms: Israel, Supersessionism/Nonsupersessionism, Christian Zionism, and Restorationism, and how this relates to the resolution the Apostle Paul sets-out in Romans 11: Israel is inextricably intertwined in God's eschatological scheme. The conclusions of this paper will serve as a basis for more detailed hermeneutical and theological treatments of this and related topics in later papers presented at this conference.



AIMS AND PURPOSE¹

The purpose of this paper is to set out a case for Israel's hope in the eschatological future. Although drawing on other biblical texts, my primary focus in this paper is Romans 11, which is the climax of the Apostle Paul's discussion and argument concerning ethnic Israel in Romans 9–11. My aims here are modest, namely, to set the scene and provide a summary biblical theology case² for God's calling and purpose for the Jewish people, with a special focus on the eschatological place of Israel as set out in Romans 11. This will serve as a basis for more detailed hermeneutical and theological treatments of this and related topics in later papers presented at this conference.

DISCLOSURE

I approach this issue from a premillennial but also a non-dispensational perspective (I lean towards post-tribulationism). My position, then, is hardly one typically associated with the main pro-Israel stereotypes sometimes bandied about in much of today's debate. Arguably much of that debate has become oversimplified whereby nonsupersessionism, Christian Zionism and pro-Israel camps are all bunched together (often pejoratively) under a dispensationalist banner. Yet the reality is far more complex than such parodies suggest, so now seems an appropriate time to set out some terminology before proceeding.

¹ This paper is presented in a conference talk format and as such references are minimal. A list of further reading is included at the end of the paper.

² Biblical theology is defined here as tracing biblical themes across the unfolding revelation of Scripture, with a focus on canonical, or diachronic (over synchronic) interpretation.

TERMINOLOGY

i. Israel

The term can be used in various ways, none of them mutually exclusive and which sometimes overlap considerably (whether “the Jewish people”, “ethnic Israel”, or sometimes in the field of theology “national Israel”. In short, in this paper I will use the term “Israel” to define those who identify themselves culturally, historically, religiously and ethnically as Jews.³ So in a biblical theology discussion of Israel we do not using the term to refer to the modern State of Israel, but rather the Jewish people as a whole. That said, with perhaps around fifty per cent of the world’s Jewry living in what today constitutes the State of Israel, neither can that political entity be cavalierly dismissed in this discussion. In any discussion of God’s calling and purpose of the Jewish people, the Middle East state—where half of the world’s people who identify themselves as Jews live in their ancestral homeland—remains absolutely relevant to this discussion.

I recognise that the question “who is a Jew?” is a perennial one which has been discussed at length by the Jewish people, where definitions and disagreements revolve around Jewishness as an ethnic, religious, cultural, political and/or geographical characteristic(s). My own view is that it combines elements of all these. However, time and other constraints do not allow us to delve into this issue now, so for the purposes of this paper we will simply define “Israel” as the Jewish people.

3 Craig Blaising offers a similar definition of “Israel” in “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44.3 (Sept 2001), 435.



ii. Supersessionism

This is the view that God no longer retains a plan and purpose for the Jewish people (national Israel). It comes from the Latin for sitting over or upon, the idea being it means to replace or supersede another—in this case the theological view that the Church replaces Israel as the people of God. Supersessionism is sometimes referred to as replacement theology.⁴

In his useful *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, the scholar R. Kendall Soulen moves beyond supersessionism as an over-arching term to identify three variations.⁵ The first is *punitive supersessionism*, the view that the replacement of the Jews with the Church was a punishment for the former's rejection of God (e.g., through idolatry) in the Old Testament and/or Jesus as Messiah in the New Testament. Previously the harsh position and language of this punitive supersessionist view, which was dominant in the medieval Christian era, might have been referred to as "hard supersessionism". Conversely, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust, some Protestants have moved away from the language of hard or punitive supersessionism to speak instead of Israel's role in God's economy of salvation as having been completed or fulfilled. Soulen refers to this as *economic supersessionism*, while its softer tone (albeit still triumphalist in that it still maintains God's wholesale replacement of the Jewish people) previously earned the title "soft supersessionism". Soulen's third definition is *structural supersessionism*, based on a hermeneutical reading of the canonical narrative whereby some aspects of Scripture are placed in the foreground and others are

4 For an important examination and critique of the history and theology of replacement theology see Michael Vlach, *Has The Church Replaced Israel? A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010).

5 R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996).

relegated to the background. In this classic canonical reading of Scripture dominant throughout much of Church history, then, covenant, eschatology and the Old Testament tend to be downplayed, and with them (given how it features so strongly in these topics) the role of Israel in the Bible.

I would suggest punitive supersessionism is making somewhat of a comeback, with “hard” supersessionist language perhaps more widely used than ever since the end of the Holocaust. One is also struck by how many Palestinian and pro-Palestinian Christians (including some Evangelicals) often draw on the language of punitive supersessionism in their demonisation of the modern Jewish state. Meanwhile the BDS (Boycott, Disinvestment and Sactions) efforts, which anti-Zionists are so involved in, is in some ways reminiscent of the boycotts of Jewish businesses in 1930s Europe.⁶ A key difference is how the word “Jew” has been replaced by “Israel”; but listening to how the words such as “Zionist” or “Israel” are used, it is clear that in some cases they are replacements for “Jew”, thus reflecting how elements of anti-Semitism remain among segments of Christendom.

iii. Christian Zionism

This is the theological view that God has brought (or will bring) the Jewish people back to their ancestral homeland in the Middle East. It is based on biblical and theological arguments and therefore is the religious counterpart of political Zionism, which seeks a Jewish homeland on political grounds. It is vital to recognise that Christian Zionism comes in many shapes and sizes and cannot be presented as a simplistic, homogenous expression

⁶ For a helpful (but disturbing) treatment of the re-emergence of waves of punitive supersessionism in Europe see Colin Barnes, *They Conspire Against Your People: The European Churches and the Holocaust* (Broadstairs, Kent: King's Divinity Press, 2014).



as many have sought to parody it in the current battle of ideas and simplified political narratives.

iv. Restorationism and Nonsupersessionism

Restorationism is the view that God retains a plan and purpose for the Jewish people, that He will somehow restore His people in his eternal plan. However, restorationism can take several forms. Some, on the basis of Acts 1:6, believe God will physically restore the Kingdom of Israel in a geographical sense—a view which falls within parts of the Christian Zionist camp. Other restorationists, however, focus on the people rather than the land, which they maintain can be regarded as incidental. Others may argue God *will* restore the Jewish people to the land, where they will be in the eschatological future. However, they state that we cannot be certain the modern State of Israel is such a restoration, or indeed if we are actually in the end times. A further complication is that elsewhere in theology, in the subdiscipline of Pentecostal Studies, restorationism is the view that God is restoring to the Church all of the apostolic gifts and callings.

Therefore, given these complications I prefer the word “nonsupersessionism” as an umbrella term to identify those who believe God retains a plan and purpose for the Jewish people, whether Christian Zionist or not. It is not particularly ideal to identify oneself by what you are not, but in this case seems the best way forward to avoid confusion.

ROMANS 11

Having established this important background we can now move on to Romans 11. But before we do so, we need to consider briefly what Jesus said shortly before the ascension, in Acts 1:6-8:

So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

It is important to note that Jesus is speaking here to the disciples (now the apostles), who had lived and fellowshiped with and been taught by their Master for three years. The ascension represents the culmination of their period of discipleship under Jesus and marks the beginning of the new task of apostleship as leaders of a new Church. This is a significant moment as Jesus shares His last thoughts with them immediately before He is taken up to heaven.

So when they asked Jesus if now is the time the kingdom was to be restored to Israel, either they got it spectacularly wrong (in which case one would naturally expect these newly-qualified apostles would have been corrected by Jesus as was so often the case in the Gospels), or else they were not wrong at all, that indeed their expectations (if not timing) were correct. After their three-year discipleship period in preparation for this moment, one struggles to see how—if they were so woefully wrong in their understanding—the matter would be left as it is in Acts 1, with Jesus immediately leaving to their own devices (and to run His new Church) a group of disciples who had just proved they had failed their apprenticeship.

Instead, the passage naturally suggests that the disciples’ expectation of a hope for Israel was not erroneous at all, rather simply the timing. The passage indicates they were thinking “Israel’s hope here and now”, whereas Jesus’ words indicate a future hope for Israel, a hope that is projected into the eschatological future. Note, for example, Jesus’ reference to the



“times and seasons” fixed by the Father, echoing similar phrases in Matthew 24:36 and 1 Thessalonians 5:1, significantly both eschatological in context. Likewise, Paul suggests a future hope for Israel in Romans 11 when he states: “A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved” (11:25b-26a). It is to this future, eschatological hope in Romans 11 we now turn. We begin with some background to this important chapter.

BACKGROUND TO ROMANS 11

Romans 11 is the culmination of an argument set out by Paul over three chapters (9–11). Arguably, the general consensus today is that the entire focus of this section of Romans is upon ethnic, or national, Israel (note Paul’s several references to his kinsmen according to the flesh in 9:1-5). One important exception is the scholar N. T. Wright who ascribes Israel with different meanings even within the space of a few words in the latter part of Romans 11. There is insufficient space to become distracted on this issue here, and it seems best to leave the matter to another well-known scholar and friend of Wright’s (Larry Hurtado) who makes the following observation:

I find this friend for whom I have great admiration unpersuasive in his handling of this material. It is remarkable that, per his view, in Romans 11:25a the “Israel” upon whom a “hardening” (against the Gospel) has come = the Jewish people, but (within only a few words) the “all Israel” who shall be saved in 11:25b = the church (composed, to be sure, as Wright emphasizes, of gentiles and those Jews who, like Paul, accept the Gospel). Shifting the meaning of “Israel” within one verse, that’s going some!⁷

7 Larry Hurtado, “Paul and Israel’s Salvation: In Dialogue With Tom Wright”, Larry Hurtado’s blog (18 April 2012). Available at <https://larryhurtado.com>.

Hurtado also makes the point that however one views—or disagrees with—Paul’s views on this issue, it is important to let Paul speak for himself rather than seek to change the meaning of Paul’s intent to make his views more palatable. It is indeed an important point for biblical scholars to bear in mind. Another point I would make is that this demonstrates the dangers of synchronic over diachronic interpretation, focusing upon and basing a doctrine on a short passage or meaning of a single word, rather than building a more robust doctrinal case upon a canonical/biblical theology theme. A final (and somewhat unrelated point) here is how Paul devotes around a fifth of his seminal epistle to the Romans on this issue, which directly challenges those who maintain the New Testament has little to say about national Israel.

ROMANS 11 AND ESCHATOLOGY

So what has Romans 11 to do with the future, or eschatological, hope of Israel? On the surface this chapter does not immediately appear to focus on eschatological matters; and, arguably, we could instead explore Israel’s future hope in, say, several lengthy Old Testament apocalyptic passages or perhaps look at the theme of Israel in the New Testament book of Revelation. Yet upon closer examination Romans 11 *is* thoroughly eschatological in its dealings with the future hope of Israel. Consider the evidence:

First, Paul’s argument across Romans 9 to 11 seems clearly to divide across three stages of time (which the later inserters of chapters and verses seem to have recognised from the natural progression of Paul’s argument across this section of Scripture).

wordpress.com/2012/04/18/paul-and-israels-salvation-in-dialogue-with-tom-wright/ (last accessed 13 June 2015).



Thus Romans 9 focuses on Israel's past, Romans 10 on her present state, while Romans 11 shifts focus by and large to Israel's future.

Next, in Romans 11 Paul juxtaposes a *remnant* of Israel in the *here and now* (11:5) with the *future* salvation of *all Israel* (11:25-27). We can go further. As the chapter progresses the apostle juxtaposes a *firstfruits* of Israel being saved (11:15-16) with the *whole lump* in the future (their full inclusion, 11:12). Here Paul is drawing on an Old Testament concept of the firstfruits of a sacrifice compared with the later and full, or complete, offering. Surely, too, it is not insignificant that "firstfruits" also has eschatological connotations elsewhere in Scripture, notably Christ as the firstfruits of the resurrection when He was resurrected, which is compared with the resurrection of all humanity at the end of time (see 1 Cor 15). Likewise, a remnant of Israel is saved now (the firstfruits), with Paul proclaiming the fullness of Jews ushered into the kingdom in the future.

Another feature of Romans 11 indicating an eschatological theme in Paul's mind is his partial quotation in 11:26-27 of Isaiah 59. Paul quotes Isaiah as a basis of Israel's future salvation. Significantly, the very Isaiah passage he cites sets out the future judgment, coming of the Lord and the salvation of Israel (59:19).

Finally, Romans 11:25-26 refers to "time of the Gentiles". This choice of words echoes very closely Luke's choice of words in his eschatological treatment in 21:24. Note that Luke's context here, which strongly echoes much of the material in Matthew's great eschatological discourse (Matt 24-25), is clearly eschatological, pertaining to the eschaton (or end times). So in summary, in Romans 11 Paul affirms categorically that God has not rejected national Israel (11:1), going on to juxtapose her present condition with her future hope (see figure 1).

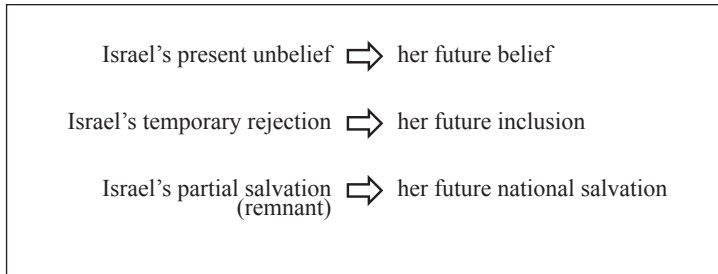


Figure 1

Thus, the apostle culminates with the climax of Romans 9–11 in 11:25-27:

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”; “and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

But it is not just Romans 11 that discusses Israel’s future hope and salvation. This *Day of the Lord + national Israel + her salvation* formula appears in numerous biblical passages, notably Isaiah 59 (see above), Ezekiel 36:22-29 and arguably Jeremiah 31:31-34. These texts detail not only the cleansing of Israel, but also God putting upon them His Spirit. Thus we read in Zechariah 12:10, 13:1 (note again yet another eschatological passage relating to the future hope of Israel, in the context of her cleansing):

And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they



shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn...

“On that day there shall be a fountain opened for the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to cleanse them from sin and uncleanness.

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE ARE SAYING

That Israel is inextricably intertwined in God’s eschatological scheme. This is a twin theme which runs through much of Old Testament, Acts 1:6, Romans 9–11, the book of Revelation and various other passages we have commented briefly upon (and many we have not). So not only is Israel a major biblical theme running across both Testaments, it is also projected into the eschatological future where her fortunes are inextricably intertwined with God’s eschatological dealings with the nations.

Given this link between Israel and eschatology, it is hardly surprising that traditions and churches that tend to downplay eschatology also relegate Israel to the sidelines. Indeed this is precisely the point Soulen makes, where a distorted canonical narrative that relegates Israel (and eschatology) to the background all but writes Israel out of God’s entire story, as expressed across the whole of the Bible’s unfolding revelation. I am sure many of us here can identify individual churches with a weak emphasis on eschatology. The chances are also that there will be a weak (or missing) treatment of the biblical theme of Israel.

To recap, then, Israel’s future hope is her national salvation (cf. Zech 12:10). Note how, through Israel, God demonstrates His salvific plan. Indeed it is through Israel that we receive salvation; as Jesus stated to the woman at the well, “Salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). God raised the Jewish nation, through who comes a Jewish Messiah, to bring salvation to the world. If God’s

salvation of humanity, and all that represents, is everything that Satan despises, and Israel was instrumental in bringing that salvation to this world, who would Satan most likely make war upon? I find it striking how Revelation 7 speaks of the dragon attacking the woman (Israel) and then making war on her other offspring. In their excellent book, David Torrance and Howard Taylor identify how two of the most godless ideologies of the twentieth century—Stalinism and Nazism—likewise made war on the Jewish people. It is all the more concerning, then, when people, in the name of Christianity, seek to demonise Israel. It is not legitimate criticism of Israel that is the issue (which is wholly acceptable), or even that such people subscribe to supersessionism (a position I consider biblically unsustainable but which, in itself, does not, in my view, constitute heterodoxy or inclinations towards anti-Semitism). Rather, it is the singling out of the Jewish state as the causer of all ills, to the detriment of every other conflict, and how Israel is irrationally held to a different standard than any other nation.

This aside and moving on, if, as Jesus stated, “salvation is from the Jews” it seems only fair it comes back to the Jewish people one day, which is precisely the point Paul seems to make in Romans 11. Today, a remnant is saved; but, eschatologically, national Israel as a whole will be (or as Paul refers to them, the unbelieving branches, the “whole lump”), at which stage it is important here to emphasise the national, rather than universal, salvation of Israel. The former refers to the nation as a whole; the latter refers to every single Jewish person. Paul’s context is clearly corporate, not individualist, meaning the congregation or nation will one day be saved (my colleague Andy Cheung discusses grammatically the phrase “all Israel” in my edited volume on supersessionism⁸).

8 Andy Cheung, “Who is the ‘Israel’ of Romans 11:26” in Calvin L. Smith, ed.



WHAT WE ARE NOT SAYING

That there are two ways of salvation: i.e., through both Moses and Christ, a doctrine known as dual covenantalism. Orthodox Christianity maintains that salvation comes only through Christ (John 14:6), which is why Paul always preached the gospel in the synagogues during his missionary journeys recorded in Acts.

Neither are we equating the modern, secular State of Israel wholly with biblical Israel. Clearly, as we have pointed out, “Israel” means more than those living in the Middle Eastern state, with as many Jewish people outside modern Israel as within it. Yet neither are we saying modern Israel has no bearing whatsoever on this discussion. As noted earlier, approximately half of all the Jewish people in the world live in that state in the Middle East.

Third, it is not suggested or argued that modern Israel is sinless, or demanded that Christians take an “Israel right or wrong” position. If even biblical Israel sinned, it is folly to suggest today’s Jewish state is perfect. It is not. No state is, indeed no human institution is.

Finally, I am not suggesting the issue of Israel is or should be a test of orthodoxy (as a minority on the Christian Zionist fringes seem to make it). That said, the more I see the world demonise Israel and excuse far worse things going on in the world—while many of those who demonise Israel also tend to oppose Christian values—the more I am convinced this is becoming a seminal issue for believers today.

In conclusion, Romans 11, I believe, sets out the future hope of Israel. Note too, towards the end of his three-chapter argument, how Paul wraps up his argument by highlighting God’s covenant

The Jews, Modern Israel and the New Supersessionism. Revised and Expanded Edition (Broadstairs, Kent: King’s Divinity Press, 2013), 119-38.

with the Jewish people (11:27), extended nationally on account of the Patriarchs (11:28). Having established this historical act of grace towards the Jewish people, Paul ends by stating that the callings and gifts of God (in this case His calling of Israel) are irrevocable (11:29). In other words, he tells his audience, God has not finished with Israel.

Further Reading

BROADLY NONSUPERCESSIONIST

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