Romans 11 and the Redemption of Israel

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It is often asserted that the divine purpose with Israel as a nation and with the Jewish people as a distinct ethnicity is a thing of the past – the nation has been replaced by the church.

In dealing with Romans 11, P. Robertson asserts that, "nothing in this chapter says anything about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, or of a return to the land of the Bible, or of a restoration of a national state of Israel."[1] Robertson reinforces his argument by referring to the book of Revelation, "nowhere in this book are the Jewish people described as having a distinctive part in this kingdom".[2] In following this line of reasoning he is merely articulating the view of many of the churches, who fail to see that the book of Revelation has any significance to the Jewish people. Thus S. L. Chafer states, "All that is related to her covenants and promises are in abeyance...No Jewish Covenants are now being fulfilled". [3] J. Dwight does not believe in a continuing remnant of Israel, but rather in complete blindness: "There is no continuing remnant of Israel with whom God is particularly dealing today...Because that nation is now blinded, God can not have a

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[1] P.O. Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Philipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2000), 191.

[2] *The Israel of God,* 165. So also L.J., Bray, *Israel in Prophecy* (Lakeland: J.L. Bray Ministry,1983,1995), 29-30, "Surely no one will say that there is a single solitary verse anywhere in the entire NT which teaches a future restoration of the Jews to Palestine, nor of their conversion to Christ after his second coming."

[3] S. L. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (8 vols; Dallas: Seminary Press, 1983), 6:83.

remnant within the nation".[1] This view has been dubbed *amillennial supercessionism*.

The opposite view has been dubbed *progressive dispensationalism*, and this states that Israel continues to be the chosen medium for displaying God's purpose. Moses understood that the complete destruction and extermination of the Jews as a race and a nation was an abrogation of the promises and a failure of the divine will (Deut 9:27-29, Jer.31-36, Mal.3:6, Rom.11:27). This view states that Yahweh continues to be revealed in Israel, both within and apart from the body of believers; God is still revealed through the existence of the people of Israel, just as in times past. Accordingly, God will restore the kingdom to Israel in a future millennial dispensation. Meanwhile, "*blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in*" (Rom 11:25).

In contrast to these two views, a third position can be elaborated. If Israel does not remain centre-stage in the purpose of God, this makes a mockery of the witness of the Old Testament prophets. However, this fact does not mean that God's purpose with Israel has been *progressive* over the last two thousand years. On the contrary, while Israel's experience in their dispersion among the nations has been accurately described in the OT, this has not been a progressive experience; the particularities of this history were not prophesied by the OT prophets, and there has not been any prophet since NT times.

The situation for the last 2000 years has been analogous to the inter-testamental period. During this time, the prophets did not prophesy events relating to the nation. The pattern of prophecy in the OT therefore is threefold: detailed events leading up destruction and exile, silence over the detail of the exile with the exile described in general terms, and detailed events surrounding the return of the people and

[1] J. Dwight, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 293-94.

their restoration under a Davidic Messiah followed by silence. Thus, the last two thousand years have been a period of prophetic silence.

In keeping with the tendency of systematic theologians to find titles for their "systems" of doctrine, this third position can be dubbed *punctuated dispensationalism*. This view states that God has given detailed information about the "last days" and the return of Israel to the land and how their restoration will be realized by their Messiah, but he has not supplied information about Israel's long period of dispersion.

Scholars who argue a supercessionist case assume that the church began at Pentecost and has continued in an unbroken sense since that time; they further assume that blindness to Israel happened at that time and has continued in an unbroken sense since that time. But this "continuity" can't be found in the NT - the NT writings presume a "last days" period of time and such a period has not been ongoing for 2000 years. Accordingly, the remnant that was brought out at *that time* and the blindness that happened at *that time* remain just that: the groupings of *that time*. It's exactly parallel to the remnant that clustered around Isaiah and Hezekiah versus the grouping of leaders and "the wicked" in the land that was judged by the Assyrian invader in 701 B.C.E; both these groupings came and went. The church today is not the remnant of Israel, it has no dual identity; it is the body of Christ meeting on the basis of the faith "left behind" by the apostles.

Elijah is a prototype of any "eschatological witnesses" who "turn the hearts of the children to the [Covenants of] the fathers" (Mal 4:4-6). In the first century, Paul was part of the witness of this "Spirit of Elijah" in the apostles. The mission of the "eschatological prophets" to Israel (Rev 10:11) is the counterpart to Paul's election as the apostle to the gentiles

(Rom 11: 13; Acts 9:15).[1] Any such eschatological witness produces a "remnant" at the time of witness from among Israel. With the future eschatological witnessing of "Elijah" there will once again be a remnant of Israel, and like the Jews in the first century, the body of Christ will be expected to align itself with "Elijah" in the last days. At this time, Elijah's role will be to call out a remnant of the Jewish people, and these will bear a dual identity as both a remnant within Israel the people and as a particular community within the body of Christ". [2]

In the first century, *part* of Israel was not blinded; it was with this remnant that Jesus established the New Covenant through his own ministry and in the ministry of the apostles. But this is not to say that everything relating to the New Covenant was completely fulfilled; the purpose of God was not completed at that time because Israel did not fully repent (Acts 3:19-25). Hence, there is yet to be a final acceptance of this covenant "from the least of them unto the greatest of them" (Jer 31:34), a completion to be expected in the last days yet to come.

In Pauline terms, the idea of a "remnant" implies a corresponding "hardening" on the part of Israel. This presents a problem to Paul, which he resolves with the idea of a "future forgiveness" and in-grafting of the Jews (Rom 11: 23). Along with the grafting in of the gentiles, Paul refers to this complex of happenings as a "mystery" in the purpose of God. Hence, the letter to the Ephesians records,

> Having made know unto us the mystery...that in the dispensation of the *fullness of times* he might gather

[1] Paul a persecutor from Benjamin (Rom.11:1; Gen.49: 27), blind (Acts 9: 8 *cf.* Rom.11:25 see Gen.27:1 contrast Gen.48:10), and elected (1 Sam.20:42; Rom.9:11).

[2] The question arises as to whether Elijah will emerge within the body of Christ or outside this body from the ranks of Israel.

> together in one *all things* (*cf*. all Israel) in Christ. (Eph 1:9, 10, cf. 3:1-5).

In the first century, this interrelated set of happenings—hardening of Israel—the coming out of a remnant—the grafting in of the gentiles—the forgiveness of wider Israel—was not "finished". The "finish" is set for the sounding of the last trumpet.

> In the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished... (Rev 10: 7).[1]

One way to establish that the reality of a *future* restoration of Israel under the Davidic Messiah is to compare Romans 11 and Revelation 11 and set the teaching of Romans 11 in an apocalyptic context. That the apostolic message in Romans 11 *should* be interpreted in the context of an apocalyptic worldview is indicated in Paul's allusion to the example of Elijah. Elijah had learnt that God's justice was always tempered with mercy – the divine will was expressed not only in judgment (wind, earthquake, fire) but also in grace (the still small voice proclaiming the divine attributes). Paul alludes to this reality in the words,

> Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God. (Rom.11: 22, cf. Exod33:19, Rom.9:15)[2]

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[1] Two of the chapters that Paul quotes from (Rom.11:8 = Deut.29:4 & Isa.29:10) make a reference to the vision being like a sealed book (Isa.29:11 cf. Rev.5:1) and to the secret things belonging to God unless he chooses to reveal them (Deut.29: 29 cf.Rev.10:8).

[2] Compare the *"Song of Witness"* in Deut.31:21 and 32; 39-43; "I kill, and I make alive; I wound and I heal....and *will be merciful* unto his land and his people." Compare the rainbow *covenant of mercy* (Rev.10:1) and the correspondence between Deut.32:40 with Rev.10:5.

The "goodness" here is both the gentile mission and the calling out of a remnant from Israel; the "severity" is the hardening of Israel. Revelation 11 is clearly working with the same template of prophetic organisation:

ROMANS 11	REVELATION 11
2. God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew. Wot ye not what the scripture saith of Elijah?	6. These [Moses and Elijah] have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy
3 Lord, they have **killed thy prophets**	7. Shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, **and kill them**.
4. I have reserved to myself **seven thousand men.**	13. And **the remnant were** affrighted, and gave glory to the God of heaven.
5. Even so then at this present time also there **is a remnant** according to the election of grace.	
25. Until the fullness of the **Gentiles** be come in.	2. For it [=court of the gentiles] is given unto the **Gentiles...**

The difference between Revelation 11 and Romans 11 is that Revelation gives the fuller picture of how this "calling out—hardening—and grafting" is finished with the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom. We can expect that the nation, like Paul himself, will be *partially blinded again*, there will be a witness to the nation and a remnant, but that events will be "finished" with the final reconciliation of Israel to God.