

Justin Martyr (c.100-165 AD) was one of the first of many who, in effect, said, 'Yes, God has cast away His people!' This emerges in his dialogue with Trypho the Jew:

For the circumcision according to the flesh, which is from Abraham, was given for a sign; that you may be separated from other nations, and from us; and that you alone may suffer that which you now justly suffer; and that your land may be desolate, and your cities burned with fire; and that strangers may eat your fruit in your presence, and not one of you may go up to Jerusalem.¹

John Chrysostom (c.347-407) was more explicit in his *Adversus Judaeos*:

. . . when God forsakes a people, what hope of salvation is left? When God forsakes a place, that place becomes the dwelling of demons.²

But it is hard to comprehend how such men could say these things in the light of Paul's answer to his own question in Romans 11:2: 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew'.³

Tragically, the views of men like those quoted above have given rise to much anti-Jewish prejudice among churches, often resulting in outright persecution of the Jewish people by professed Christians. The Jewish community is only too aware of this Christian anti-Semitism. It is also well aware of the 'replacement theology' of many Christians and churches in which it is asserted that the church under the New Covenant replaces the Jewish nation in every respect as Israel. In the light of all this, we can hardly be surprised to discover that most Jewish people conclude that Christianity is not for them, and so are unwilling to listen to our message. Clearly the answer to Paul's question in Romans 11:1 ('Has God cast away His people?') is of more than merely academic interest. So we shall

look now at Paul's own answer to his question, focusing mainly on Romans 9-11 as the New Testament's locus classicus for this subject.

We should note at the outset that in Romans 9-11 Paul gives three entire chapters to the question of the Jewish people. This alone shows how important the whole matter is to him. But he highlights the importance of this issue even more strongly by the very placing of his discussion in Romans, a book which is generally regarded as first in importance among Paul's epistles. The implication is clear, that if the question of the Jewish people was of primary concern for Paul in his greatest epistle, it should also be of primary concern for us today.

We also need to note that these three chapters are not, as many imagine, a mere digression from Paul's main argument in Romans. They may appear to be so at first sight when Paul seems to be changing abruptly from his great themes of salvation, justification and sanctification to the question of the Jewish people. But on closer examination we discover that these chapters are integral to Paul's whole argument in Romans as he unfolds his underlying theme. That theme, as John Murray highlights,⁴ is stated in 1:16-17:

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'.

Paul shows that the Gospel is indeed 'the power of God to salvation' by first establishing human sinfulness. From this he goes on to speak of justification by faith in Christ, followed by his thrilling exposition of the blessings and benefits

that flow, by God's grace and power, from justification. But all of this leaves us with one perplexing question that apparently undermines Paul's initial assertion in 1:16-17 as to the Gospel being the power of God unto salvation. If the Gospel really is 'the power of God unto salvation . . . for the Jew first', why Israel's large-scale apostasy and unbelief? Paul must now answer this question in Romans 9-11 in order to vindicate the truth of his own assertion as to the power of God in the Gospel, even among the Jewish people in their unbelief. God allowed Israel as a whole to reject the Gospel in order that the Gentiles might hear and be saved (11:11). Nevertheless, God did not forsake ancient Israel, but simply allowed them to be hardened in part (11:25), leaving 'a remnant according to the election of grace' of those who believe the Gospel (11:5). But this is not the end of the matter in that one day the Jewish nation as a whole will turn back to its Messiah in faith (11:12, 15, 26). So Paul resolves the mystery of Israel (11:5, 25-26), and in so doing completely vindicates his initial statement that the Gospel is 'the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek'.

Space does not allow here for a verse-by-verse commentary of Paul's carefully articulated but complex arguments. For this the reader is recommended to consult the excellent expositions of John Murray's *Epistle to the Romans* and D M Lloyd-Jones' sermons on Romans 9-11. Instead, we shall deal now with some of the questions more commonly raised by Christians about the Jewish people and see how Paul answers those questions in these chapters.

What does Paul mean by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11?

Clearly we must answer this question at the outset in order to give a clear answer to the other questions as to God's ongoing purposes for 'Israel'. 'Israel' can mean several things in Scripture. It was the name first given to Jacob when he wrestled with God (Genesis 32:28), and meant 'he strives with God - God strives'. Subsequently Jacob's Jewish descendants were called 'Israel', along with those Gentiles who became part of their nation (Genesis 47:27; Exodus 12:38; Ruth 1:16). Then the land inherited by the people of Israel was called 'the land of Israel' (1 Samuel 13:19). Later, when the kingdom was divided, the northern kingdom was known as 'Israel' (1 Kings 12:16-21). Some would also argue that the New Testament calls the church 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16 - though neither context nor translation in this instance are unambiguously clear in favour of such an identification. How, then, do we determine what Paul means by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11? Louis Berkhof highlights that in the use of words in Scripture, 'the essential point is that of their particular sense in the connection in which they occur'.⁵ Modern students of linguistics make this point more emphatically by insisting that words 'have meaning only in a context',⁶ and that 'theological thought of the type found in the New Testament has its characteristic linguistic expression not in the word individually but in the word-combination or sentence'.⁷ In other words, we must determine what Paul means by 'Israel' in Romans 9-11 by observing his definition and use of the word in this very context.

Paul defines his term at the outset - 'my brethren,

my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites'. Then, through the rest of these chapters, Paul makes a 'sustained contrast between Israel and the Gentiles'.⁸ So when Paul speaks of 'Israel' in Romans 9-11, he is defining 'Israel' in context as ethnic Israel or the Jewish people (not the land or the church), scattered throughout the Graeco-Roman world of that generation, just as they are scattered throughout the whole world today.

Some exegetes insist, however, that at one point in these chapters Paul momentarily adopts another meaning for the word 'Israel'. When Paul says in 11:26 that 'all Israel will be saved', they insist, Paul does not mean the Jewish nation as such, but the church or whole body of God's elect, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles. But there are a number of serious objections to their viewpoint arising from the context. Firstly, Paul defines his own use of the term clearly at the outset, whilst proceeding in these chapters to make a 'sustained contrast between Israel and the Gentiles'. This makes an unannounced change of meaning in 11:26 unlikely. Secondly, in the verse immediately preceding 11:26 Paul approaches his final unravelling of the 'mystery' of Israel by referring again to Israel in contrast to the Gentiles. This makes an unannounced change of meaning for 'Israel' in the verse even more unlikely. Thirdly, in the second half of the very verse under discussion (11:26), continuing into the following verse, Paul justifies his assertion that 'all Israel will be saved' by means of God's promise of salvation for the Jewish descendants of Jacob (Isaiah 59:20-21). This now makes an unexplained change of meaning in 11:26 impossible, for Paul would hardly make an unannounced change of meaning for just one half of

one verse, only to revert straight back to his initial meaning without explanation whilst inserting an Old Testament quotation that underlines his original meaning. Finally, in 11:28-29 Paul rounds off his argument by assuring us that whilst many Jewish people are 'enemies' in relation to the Gospel, they are still 'beloved' for the sake of their forefathers, namely, those with whom God first made His covenant in choosing the Jewish people to be a special or elect nation:

Concerning the Gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Putting all of this together, to suggest that Paul, without warning or explanation, suddenly shifts for half a verse from Israel the nation to Israel the church and back again, is to forget the primary principle of interpretation in context and the fact that words 'have meaning only in a context'. As to why exegetes plead for an unexpected change of meaning in 'Israel', contrary to all that the immediate context indicates, there may be various reasons. Some do it in all good faith, for whatever reason. Some do it out of deference to revered expositors like Calvin. Some do it in the interests of a theological or eschatological agenda imported from elsewhere, as in the case of 'replacement theology' or certain brands of amillennialism. Yet others do it out of anti-Semitic prejudice, or an anti-Israel prejudice that is provoked by what they suppose to be the injustices of the modern state of Israel. But whatever their reasons, these exegetes are introducing a very arbitrary approach to interpretation which ignores the most fundamental rules. One trusts that they do not apply the same approach to other parts of Scripture.

Does God still have a special love and care for the Jewish people?

All too often the answer of professed Christians has been 'No!' Their ground for saying this, more often than not, is that God supposedly rejected the Jewish nation when the Jewish nation rejected Jesus.

Jewish people are well aware of such views among Christians and churches. They are also aware of how such views have found expression in the persecution of their forbears by professedly Christian people in the Crusades, the Inquisition and the Pogroms of Eastern Europe and other times of persecution. More than this, they are aware that many who claimed to follow Christ either joined cause with the Nazis against them, or simply ignored their plight and made no genuinely meaningful protest against Hitler's 'Final Solution'. Their conclusion? That we as Christians suppose that God no longer loves and cares for them in any special way, even that God has placed them under a curse. Again, we can see why attempts to share the Gospel with Jewish people often meet with negative or hostile responses from them. This Christian lack of compassion and concern for the Jewish people is inexplicable in the light of Romans 11:28:

Concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.

'Beloved for the sake of the fathers'. Paul's choice of words could hardly be clearer. Maybe many Israelites or Jewish people are 'enemies' in relation to the Gospel, but 'concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers', namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

'Beloved for the sake of the fathers'. So some of us

may surely be forgiven for feeling disturbed when our fellow believers are either indifferent to or hostile towards the Jewish people. Our point is that if God still loves them, then so must we who claim to love God.

Are the Jewish people still a chosen nation today?

This is a natural sequel to the previous question, though taking the previous points somewhat further. It is often said that, 'The Jews are no longer God's chosen people in the sense in which they were from the call of Abraham to the coming of Christ'.⁹ This would seem to be the plain implication of Hebrews 8:13, where we learn that the old or first covenant has been superseded by the New Covenant: In that He says, 'A new covenant', He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

From this we might be tempted to conclude that the very covenant that constituted the Jewish people a chosen nation before God is no longer in force. But again, context must determine interpretation. In context Hebrews 8:13 is dealing with the passing of the Mosaic Covenant or era in relation to the New Covenant. So in context the reference to the 'first' covenant is a reference not to any of the covenants that preceded Moses, but to the first of these two covenants in view, the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant. John Calvin has grasped this point clearly when he says of this verse in his commentary on Hebrews that the 'dispensation of Moses' has 'passed away'.¹⁰ This, however, still leaves intact the Abrahamic Covenant which preceded Moses, this being the covenant by which God constituted the Jewish people as a chosen nation (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:15-18). Indeed,

in Galatians 3:16-29 Paul is explicit that the Mosaic Covenant did not annul the Abrahamic Covenant, the very covenant by which the Jewish people were constituted a chosen nation. Then in Romans 11 Paul talks about Israel as God's people, even in their unbelief, clearly implying that the covenant which constituted them God's people, the Abrahamic covenant, is still in force.

Turning to Romans 11:1-2, Paul's own answer to his question is unequivocal: 'Has God cast away His people . . . God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew'. He goes on, in 11.28-29, to speak of Israel's 'election' and to insist that its 'calling' as a nation is 'irrevocable'. What is more, Paul wrote this in c.57-58 AD when the New Covenant was already fully established. So even in this New Covenant dispensation the Jewish nation continues to be an elect, chosen nation before God, as promised in the Abrahamic covenant and subsequently re-affirmed with the patriarchs.

'God has not cast away His people whom he foreknew'. But the Greek word translated here as 'foreknew', as D M Lloyd-Jones points out, is the same as the word translated as 'foreordained' in 1 Peter 1:20.¹¹ So David Stern's Jewish New Testament is justified in the translation, 'God has not repudiated His people, whom he chose in advance'.¹² The context of Romans 11 confirms this when Paul later speaks of Israel's 'election' by God. 'Has God cast away His people? Certainly not!' But the 'certainly not' of the New King James Version is weak, as one commentator explains: The Greek term means, don't permit it to come into existence; don't permit it to be created; don't let it occur. In the Hebrew it is one word which means profane or profanity. In other words, the Apostle is saying that it is

profane even to think that it would ever be possible for God to be through with the Jews. The thought of God casting off His people Israel is profanation.¹³

Why is it profane and inconceivable to think of God casting off the Jewish nation? Because God not only made His covenant with Israel, but subsequently promised that He could never break his covenant by casting them away (Leviticus 26:44-45). Paul would have known all this, as also promises like that of Jeremiah 31:35-37:

Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for a light by day, the ordinances of the moon and the stars for a light by night . . . if those ordinances depart from before me, says the Lord, then the seed of Israel shall also cease from being a nation before me forever . . . If heaven above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out beneath, I will also cast off the seed of Israel for all that they have done, says the Lord.

Have the sun and moon departed? Has man yet measured the heavens? Most certainly not (not even today)! Therefore, Paul concludes, God has not cast away His ancient people Israel. Even the thought of it is profane and inconceivable.

If Israel is an elect nation, does this mean that all Jewish people will come to salvation, or that they will automatically be saved simply by being Jewish?

The writer once asked a young Jewish man whether he knew if he would be saved and go to heaven when he died. He replied, 'Yes!' When pressed as to what made him so sure, he responded in the words of the Jewish prayer book that 'All Israel have a portion in the world to come'.¹⁴

In the early 20th century the German-Jewish thinker Franz Rosenweig (1886-1929) articulated a two-covenant theology:

What Christ and his church means within the world – on this point we are agreed. No one comes to the Father except through him . . . but the situation is different when one need no longer to come to the Father because he is already with him. That is the case with the nation of Israel¹⁵

In other words, Rosenweig believes that whilst Gentiles may come to God through Jesus in terms of the New Covenant, the Jewish people have no need of Jesus because they are already with God by virtue of their older Jewish covenant. This two-covenant theology has gained favour among various Jewish leaders and church leaders today, who use it to oppose Jewish evangelism.¹⁶ E P Sanders' 'covenantal nomism' and belief in terms of Jesus that, 'His mission was to Israel in the name of the God of Israel',¹⁷ has only strengthened their conviction that Jewish people have no need of a message of salvation through Jesus.

Again, the writer has often been told by Jewish friends, 'If you believe in Jesus, fine! He's your Messiah, but not mine! I can come to God without Jesus because I am Jewish and we are already with God'.

To the contrary, Paul is quite clear that the chosen status of the Jewish nation does not mean salvation for all of them or automatic salvation just by being Jewish. Rather, Paul says:

But Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law (Romans 9:31-32).

Because of unbelief they were broken off (Romans 11:20).

In the light of this, Paul cannot but pray in the most impassioned terms that his Jewish brethren would come to salvation through Christ:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh . . . (Romans 9:1-3).

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Romans 10:1).

So whatever Israel's election means, it does not mean that they will all be saved, or that they will be saved as Jews by their own covenant.

So exactly what does Israel's election mean?

The problem is that many Christians think of election as meaning simply the election of individuals to salvation. But as Louis Berkhof notes, 'the Bible speaks of election in more than one sense'.¹⁸ As to the Jewish nation, Berkhof explains that, 'there is the election of Israel as a people for special privileges and for special service'.¹⁹

What are these special privileges to which Israel is elected?

Israel was elected to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6), as also a means of blessing to other nations (Genesis 12:1-3).

Israel was elected to be a nation under God's special protection (Genesis 12:3) – as in their in their deliverance from enemies like Pharaoh, Haman, the Romans in the 1st and 2nd C AD, and Hitler in the 20th C.

Israel's national election encompassed the individual election of some Jewish people to personal salvation through the Gospel (Romans 11:5). Not only this, but it also included the promise of the salvation of the Jewish nation as a whole one day through their Messiah (Romans 11:12, 15, 26-27) –

not every single Jew at that point in time, but the Jewish people en-masse as opposed to a mere remnant.

Finally, Israel's election means that when they finally turn en-masse to God through Messiah, this will be a blessing to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11-12, 15) and a sign also that the coming of the Lord is very near (Luke 13:34-35).

More could be said, but again space prevents us from entering into greater detail here.

What sort of response to the Gospel can we expect from the Jewish people today?

Many Christians today are negative about the work of the Gospel among Jewish people. Knowing that Jewish people often react unfavourably to the Gospel message, they conclude that we cannot expect much from them today. They may even say, 'Why waste time with the Jews, we cannot really expect much from them today!' or 'Why waste time with them when God has so clearly finished with them!'

Paul's answer is more positive: 'Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace' (Romans 11:5). In fact, the earliest church was wholly Jewish (see Acts 1-9). Later, when the Gentiles began to accept the Gospel (see Acts 10), large numbers of Jewish people continued to embrace the faith (see Acts 14:1; 17:4; 21:20; 28:23-24). Certainly the proportion of Gentile believers rapidly outgrew that of Jewish believers during the first four centuries AD, but we find evidence of a continuing strong Jewish presence in the church which had a considerable influence on its doctrinal formulations and apologetics.²⁰ In recent times not only have many Jewish people continued to respond positively to the Gospel, but

some of them have risen to great eminence in Christian work and ministry. One thinks of men like Alfred Edersheim, Adolph Saphir and David Baron, along with many other lesser-known Jewish believers to this day who have been or are faithful pastors, preachers, teachers and missionaries.

When we look at the real facts of the situation today concerning the Jewish response to the Gospel, we discover that Paul's optimism was fully justified. The statistics are both enlightening and encouraging. For example, the web-site of the anti-missionary site Jews for Judaism maintains that:

According to the Christian magazine *Charisma*, "More Jews have accepted Jesus as their Messiah in the past 19 years than in the past 19 centuries". Most authorities say that there are over 275,000 Jewish converts to "Hebrew Christianity" worldwide.²¹

Another anti-missionary web-site says that, 'In the last 30-40 years we Jews have witnessed a large numbers of our people becoming involved in the Hebrew-Christian movement'.²² In addition, the Jews for Judaism web-site says:

According to a 1990 Council of Jewish Federations population study, over 600,000 Jews in North America alone identify with some type of Christianity. Over the past 25 years, more than 275,000 Jews worldwide have been converted specifically by missionaries.²³

Christian sources speak of an estimated six or seven thousand²⁴ Jewish believers in Jesus in Israel and growing, with congregations in every major town and city.²⁵

These statistics, if accurate, are particularly encouraging when viewed in the light of other statistics. If the Jewish population of the world in 2003 was about 14,789,000 and the number of Jewish believers in Jesus (at a conservatively low estimate) about 500,000, then Jewish believers

constitute almost 3.5 % of the total world Jewish population. Certainly there are nations where the percentage of professed Evangelicals is higher, but there are many where the percentage is similar or less. So we have every good reason to be encouraged by the work of the Gospel among the Jewish people today and to continue to expect a positive response.

In the light of these facts, some of us can surely be forgiven for feeling perplexed and disturbed when, in this very generation when God is demonstrating that He 'has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', some Christians assert that we cannot really expect much from them. The consequence? They begin to overlook potential opportunities for sharing the Gospel with Jewish people.

In reality no other Gospel work has such definite promises of success attached to it. The fact is that 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', that 'at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace', and that at a future time known only to God 'all Israel will be saved'. So we are encouraged to go on sharing the Gospel with our Jewish friends in the knowledge that God will bless our witness to them, both now and in the future.

What responsibility does all this place on us?

It places on us the responsibility to have a genuine Christian concern for the welfare of the Jewish people, earthly and spiritual. And may we add that in this day of rising anti-Semitism the Jewish people need all the friends they can get, not least among those of us who are Christian and who claim to love the God of Israel.

It places on us the responsibility to remember in every generation that the Gospel is always, 'for the Jew first'.

It places on us the responsibility to share the Gospel with them, knowing that they can only be saved through faith in the one who is their own promised Messiah.

It places on us the responsibility to be like Paul when he said in Romans 10:1:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved.

It places on us the responsibility to 'provoke them to jealousy' by our lives and witness in order to bring them to salvation (11:11, 14). Some of us have known Jewish people to say, 'I envy your faith and all that it means to you. I wish I could have your faith'. If we are faithful in both our Christian lives and our witness to our Jewish friends, then some of them will indeed be provoked to jealousy and come to faith. To turn this round, perhaps we in this land do not see the response we would wish from the Jewish people today because so many of us are not living our Christian lives and witnessing to them in a manner that would 'provoke them to jealousy'.

In conclusion, we started with the question, 'Has God cast away His people?' We saw how Paul demonstrates very positively that, 'God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew', and that we as Christians therefore have a responsibility towards them, both earthly and spiritual. The final challenge is that we as Christians are called by Paul to 'provoke them to jealousy' by our lives and witness, knowing that in this way God will bring Jewish people to faith. And as we see our Jewish friends come to faith we are made to realize the wonderful truth of Paul's great theme in Romans that:

The Gospel of Christ . . . is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, for the Jew first, and also for the Greek.

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