

# AN EVALUATION OF N. T. WRIGHT'S VIEW OF ISRAEL IN ROMANS 11

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ONE OF THE MORE CAPABLE DEFENDERS of the view that “Israel” in Romans 11:26 is the church is N. T. Wright.<sup>1</sup> He says that there is no distinct future for Israel in God’s program. Any future for the Jewish people is found only in connection with the church as the new people of God, the “new Israel.” The reason for this view, he says, is Paul’s argument throughout Romans 1–10 that Israel can claim no special privilege over the Gentiles in her relationship with God. But in 11:25–27 Paul seems to reverse this, stating that all Israel will be saved. The problem thus becomes one of integrating Romans 11 with what precedes it. Wright responds to this apparent inconsistency by stating that Paul did not envision a future mass conversion of Jews. Instead, they are saved by grace through faith and thus become, along with believing Gentiles, part of the true people of God, the church. This process takes place throughout the church age. The traditional approach to 11:25–27, a

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<sup>1</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), esp. 231–67; idem, “The Paul of History and the Apostle of Faith,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 29 (1978): 83; idem, “Romans and the Theology of Paul,” in *Society of Biblical Literature 1992 Seminar Papers*, ed. Eugene H. Lovering Jr. (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 184–213; idem, “Romans and the Theology of Paul,” in *Romans*, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology*, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 56–62 (these last two works are distinguished in this article by their dates); idem, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:687–93; idem, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 236–46. For a similar approach see Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul’s Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 134–35.

future mass conversion, does not adequately account for Paul's earlier discussion of the futility of Israel's claim to special status on the basis of her heritage.<sup>2</sup>

### DID JESUS AND THE CHURCH SUPERSEDE ISRAEL?

Wright presents four arguments to support his interpretation. First, it is essential, he says, to understand that there is no discrete future for Israel "as a whole" because she has been superseded by Jesus Christ, her Messiah. Wright claims that Paul's theology begins "with the realization that *what the creator/covenant god was supposed to do for Israel at the end of history, this god had done for Jesus in the middle of history.*"<sup>3</sup> God has brought all of His covenant purposes for Israel to fruition in Israel's representative, the Messiah Jesus.<sup>4</sup> In Romans 1–4 Paul argued that the covenant people of God "now consists of a group that is demarcated not by the badges which signify Jewish ethnicity, but by their faith/faithfulness/belief in Jesus, himself the faithful one."<sup>5</sup> God has fulfilled His covenant promises to Abraham, promises related to the enlightenment of the world. Israel should have offered this to the world, but instead the Abrahamic covenant is put into effect through Christ. In Romans 5–8 the community rescued from the wrath of God is not the nation Israel, but the Jew-Gentile community now known as the church. The blessings mentioned in 5:1–8 that would have been seen as privileges for Israel, now belong to the Messiah and those related to Him (the church).<sup>6</sup> In 6:19, 22 the holiness that was to be Israel's alone is now found only in Christ and His people.<sup>7</sup> The privileges of 8:29 (predestination, justification, glory) that were to be Israel's are now found only in connection with Christ and Christians.<sup>8</sup>

In response to Wright's first argument against a future for Israel as a whole, it must be noted that nothing inherent in his

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<sup>2</sup> See Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 236, 245–46.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul" (1992), 186.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

statements rules out the possibility of a special future for Israel. Even if one might grant that Christ supersedes Israel; that the covenant blessings promised to Israel now belong to Him and, derivatively, to His church consisting of Jews and Gentiles; and that Israel has no independent prominence in God's agenda in order to bless the world—yet none of these rules out the possibility of a special future for ethnic Israel. Paul did not state that the spiritual condition of the Jews in his day (Israel as an enemy from the standpoint of the gospel, 11:28) was to be permanent, nor that she has no future in God's plans as a distinct entity.<sup>9</sup>

Saucy discusses the concept of a "corporate personality" in which a prominent individual and the group with which he is associated are real and preserve their respective identities while functioning together. This is especially apparent in connection with the Son of Man and the saints in Daniel 7. The Son of Man is given dominion and a kingdom forever (vv. 13–14), and so are the saints (v. 18) who take possession of the kingdom (v. 23). A similar feature is found in connection with the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 41–53. The Servant is an individual who, among other things, is entrusted with the responsibility to stimulate Israel's return to the Lord (49:5–6) and to suffer for the people (53:4–6, 9).<sup>10</sup> But in the same context the Servant is seen as Israel (see 41:8–9; 42:19; 43:10; 44:1–2, 21–22; 45:4; 48:20). Saucy observes, "In one instance the Servant, whose task it is to restore Israel to the Lord and therefore cannot be equated with the nation, is explicitly referred to as 'Israel' (49:3) in whom the Lord would display his glory (49:3). But previously the same thing was said of redeemed Israel, that in her [i.e., Israel] God 'shows forth [His] glory' (44:23). Thus we again have a situation in which the many are incorporated into one with-

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<sup>9</sup> Romans 11:28–32 probably points in this direction. The double occurrence of πάντας ("all") in 11:32 probably refers to "all people groups," not "all people" absolutely. If this is the case, then the Jews as a people group still have a place in God's future program. For the point that 11:28–32 refers to the Jews as a people, see John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM, 1989), 288; André Viard, *Saint Paul Épitre aux Romains*, Sources Bibliques (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1975), 250–51; Markus Barth, *The People of God*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 41; and Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief: Ein Kommentar* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1988), 411.

<sup>10</sup> Robert L. Saucy, "Is Christ the Fulfillment of National Israel's Prophecies? Yes and No!" (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, November 2010), 5–6. See his footnotes for the extensive secondary literature that points in this direction.

out denying the reality of either.”<sup>11</sup>

A similar phenomenon exists in the New Testament. The church is now “in Christ” (Rom. 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:6) as His body (Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–27; Eph. 4:4–16). Only in Christ is the fulfillment of covenant blessings experienced by the church (Eph. 3:6). These facts do not, however, “negate any function for the church in the fulfillment of those promises, as is asserted in relation to the promises of national Israel.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus is the great Prophet (Heb. 1:1–2), but He has given the gift of prophecy and prophets to the church (1 Cor. 12:10, 18; Eph. 4:11). He is the great High Priest (Heb. 2:17; 4:14; 7:26–27; 9:24–28; 10:11–14), but the church is a priesthood called to function as priests through Christ (Rom. 15:16; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Jesus is the great King (Luke 1:32–33; Rev. 11:15; 19:16), but believers also function as kings (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:4, 6). Paul’s commission fulfilled the mission of the Servant of the Lord originally voiced through Isaiah (see Acts 13:47).<sup>13</sup>

The question then arises, Does the church, in connection with Christ, fulfill Israel’s purposes and promises so that Israel has no distinct purpose in the future? Several points suggest that Israel as a distinct ethnic and national entity has not run her course yet. God formed Israel to mediate His name to the world (Exod. 19:6; Isa. 43:7; 44:23; 60:7, 13, 21; Ezek. 39:13; Zech. 2:5). Israel fulfills this mission almost exclusively through her existence as God reveals Himself to the world through her display of holiness (Deut. 4:5–6; 26:18–19), and this through His historical acts with Israel as a nation, including judging the people (Deut. 29:24–25; Ezek. 5:8, 13; 6:14; 7:9; 12:15–16; 15:7; 21:5; 39:21–24) and rescuing and restoring them (Exod. 6:7; 7:5; 14:4, 18; Josh. 2:10; Pss. 67:1–2, 7; 102:13–15; Isa. 49:26; 52:7–10; 55:3–5; Ezek. 36:22–36; 39:27). Even Israel’s failure did not cancel this purpose, for her failure was foreknown by God (Deut. 29:4; Ps. 69:22–23; Isa. 29:10; 42:16–19; 43:8–13, 22–28). But failure and judgment are not the end of Israel’s story. God also promised to restore the nation and cause her to fulfill His purpose for her (Lev. 26:43–44; Isa. 11:11–12; 48:9; Jer. 30:3, 10, 11; 31:8; Ezek. 20:33–44; 34:11–16; Amos 9:11–15), after which time she will radiate God’s glory to the world. Saucy writes,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

These prophecies of Israel's restoration and fulfillment of purpose refer to the same Israel who had a history of disobedience. It is the blind and deaf disobedient servant to which the spiritual transformation and restoration as a nation are promised again and again in Isaiah, not a new spiritual Israel. According to Ezekiel it is the Israel that God brought out of the land of Egypt and who had profaned the Lord's name by their disobedience (20:9, 13, 16, 21–22) that is going to be renewed and restored through a new purging even as their fathers were judged in the wilderness (20:34–44).

It is Israel as a *nation*, and not an Israel of people gathered from all nations as is the church today. In connection with the promise of a new covenant, the Lord declared that only if the fixed orders of nature ceased would "the offspring of Israel also . . . cease from being a *nation* before Me forever (Jer: [*sic*] 31:35–36). It is as a nation among nations that Israel will become a blessing to other nations that they might receive the same salvation and become God's people alongside of it (see Is. 19:23–25).<sup>14</sup>

The church does not fulfill Israel's promises related to the manifestation of the kingdom of God. Saucy argues, "As a spiritual community of God's people the church cannot manifest a paradigm of the kingdom of God before the nations as is prophesied through the theocracy of Israel where all of the structures of human society are ruled by God and there is no Caesar governing the people along with Christ as is true during this age of the church."<sup>15</sup> The prophecies regarding Israel's restoration include an incomparable display of God's power and glory, something not seen in the present manifestation of the kingdom in the church. "Israel's witness to the nations was to be primarily through God's historical actions in restoring and blessing that nation before the eyes of the world. Freed from the persecution and oppression of the nations, the spiritually transformed Israel would live in their land in God's peace and prosperity exalted among the nations who look to the God of Israel for the same blessing."<sup>16</sup> The church, however, witnesses through its suffering (John 15:18–21; Acts 9:15; 1 Pet. 4:12–19), and at the end of the age, the church wanes in its influence (Matt. 24:10–12, 37–39) and evil becomes pervasive (2 Thess. 2:3–12; Rev. 19:17–19). These Old Testament and New Testament factors, taken in concert with the contents of Romans 11, as argued in this article,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 17 (*italics added*).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 19.

suggest that Wright is incorrect in assigning “all Israel” the sense of “the church consisting in Jewish and Gentile believers.”

#### DID THE TERM “ISRAEL” LOSE ETHNIC DISTINCTIVENESS?

In his second argument against a future conversion of all Israel, Wright insists that in Romans 9–11 the word “Israel” loses ethnicity and national distinctiveness and progressively takes on a worldwide concept. “Israel” thus comes to refer in these chapters to a host of diverse peoples and no longer refers to those of Jewish ethnic and religious background. Romans 9:30–10:21 is cited by Wright as proof of the idea that “Israel” refers to a mixed group without any meaningful distinctive racial or spiritual characteristics, all being saved on the basis of salvation in Christ. Wright says, “The passage is not about ‘human responsibility’ as such, nor simply about ‘Israel’s unbelief.’ It is about the way in which, through the Messiah and the preaching which heralds him, Israel is transformed from being an ethnic people into a worldwide family.”<sup>17</sup> Wright cross-references Romans 4 and the concept of “seed” in 4:9–18, in which the descendants of Abraham include many nations (vv. 16–18). Any Jews who are saved become only a part of this diverse people of God and can claim no special place in it.<sup>18</sup> All of this supports the idea, Wright says, that Paul no longer envisions a distinct future for ethnic Israel. The true family of Abraham is broader than his physical offspring, its members being “*all* who share the faith of Abraham” (Rom. 4:16).<sup>19</sup> All this supports the idea, Wright says, that Paul understood that “Israel” refers to Jewish and Gentile believers together in the body of Christ.

However, Wright’s view has several problems. His reference to Romans 9:30–10:21 in *The Climax of the Covenant* is not bolstered by any substantial exegetical evidence, making it difficult to evaluate his contentions, and in his commentary on Romans in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* he seems to contradict the view he espouses in

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<sup>17</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 240. Similarly see Carl E. Olson, *Will Catholics Be “Left Behind”?* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003), 215–21, in his discussion of the nature of the church and Israel.

<sup>18</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 238. See also idem, “Romans and the Theology of Paul” (1992), 201, for the same thought.

<sup>19</sup> Wright, “Romans,” 690. Wright cites Galatians 3:28–29 (“There is neither Jew nor Greek . . . for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) and Philippians 3:3–4 (“for we are the true circumcision”) as additional support for defining “all Israel” to include more than Jewish believers.

*The Climax of the Covenant.* According to Wright the word Ἰσραήλ ("Israel") in 9:31, 10:19, and 21 refers to the *Jews* as an ethnically distinct people.<sup>20</sup> "Israel" does not encompass Jews and Gentiles as "a worldwide family" of God, as he claims in some of his other works. The reference to Romans 4 (where Wright contends that the concept of "seed" blurs ethnic distinctiveness) is no less problematic. To cite one example, in 4:16 the phrase οὐ τῶ ἐκ τοῦ νόμου μόνον ("not only to those of the law") is best understood as a reference to *Jewish* Christians, with an emphasis on their Jewishness,<sup>21</sup> with the remainder of the verse (ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶ ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραάμ, "but also to those of the faith of Abraham") referring to Gentile believers.<sup>22</sup>

However, this hardly proves helpful in determining if there is a future conversion for ethnic Israel. Romans 4:18 gives a hint that ethnic distinctives are by no means annulled even within the wider parameters of the one people of God. Genesis 12:2 and 18:18a promise that Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Genesis 12:3 and 18:18b promise that all the families or nations of the earth will be blessed through him. When Paul referred in Galatians 3:8 to the relationship of Gentiles to Genesis 12 and 18, he focused on the part of the covenant that says, "All the nations shall be blessed in you," and not on the promise of a single great nation.

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<sup>20</sup> In his comments on Romans 9:31; 10:19, 21, where Ἰσραήλ occurs, Wright ascribes to the word the gloss "Israel" with full-fledged ethnic Jews as its referent, and he does not seem to see "Israel" broadened to include Gentiles (see "Romans," 648–49 for his comments on 9:31, and 669–70 for his comments on 10:19 and 21). Peter Stuhlmacher points out that the citation of Deuteronomy 32:21 in Romans 10:19 refers to the people of Israel and not an amalgamated group (*Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994]), 160–61). Furthermore Israel's situation in Deuteronomy 32 is analogous to the plight of Israel in Paul's day. Israel was distant from God (Deut. 32:19–20; Rom. 10:19). She would be provoked through God's compassion extended to the Gentiles (Deut. 32:21; Isa. 65:1; Rom. 11:13–14). And she will eventually find salvation through God's compassion and strength (Deut. 32:34–43; Rom. 11:25–32). Paul seems to have used Deuteronomy 32 as a proof text of what was occurring in his day. If "Israel" in Deuteronomy 32 referred to the nation or people as a whole, Paul probably intended it that way in Romans 9–10, making it exceedingly unlikely that Wright's assertion is valid. See also R. B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 163–64.

<sup>21</sup> See Andrea van Dülmen, *Die Theologie des Gesetzes bei Paulus*, Stuttgarter biblische Monographien (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968), 94; and William S. Campbell, "The Rule of Faith in Romans 12:1–15:13," in *Romans*, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology*, 280.

<sup>22</sup> So Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 385–86; and Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 279.

In Romans 4:18 Paul cited Genesis 17:5, connecting Gentiles to the “many nations” aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, just as he connected the two in Galatians 3:8 and Genesis 12:3 and 18:18b. Even in Romans 4, then, identical means of salvation for Jews and Gentiles does not necessarily diminish their ethnic uniqueness. Even if it were inferred legitimately from the passage that ethnic distinctives were canceled in the one people of God, and it is debatable that it can be, it throws little light on the question of whether in the future God might sovereignly and graciously save the Jewish people as a distinct whole.<sup>23</sup>

Wright also may have missed an important element inferred from Romans 1:16, where Paul introduced his gospel as applicable to all, though it is especially fitting for the Jewish people (Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον, “to the Jew first,” 1:16). Along these lines Lincoln writes:

There is a priority in God’s dealings with Israel. Paul’s gospel itself is for all, but for the Jew first. . . . Rom. 1:18–4:25 with its stress on the impartiality of divine righteousness in both its judgmental and its saving aspects, just as much as the discussion of Rom. 9:1–10:21, prepares the ground for the revelation of 11:25–32 about the unexpected way God will remain faithful to his election of Israel. It helps to remove any notions of presumption about that election and to make clear that God will be faithful in a free and sovereign way—not because Israel as an ethnic entity can make binding claims on him but because in his mercy he will choose to have Israel recognize its Messiah.<sup>24</sup>

If Lincoln is right, then the priority of the gospel for Israel leaves open the possibility that God has determined that there is a future for them in which they are saved as a distinct people. There may be no better way to show the suitability of the gospel for the Jews than through their future, large-scale conversion to Christ.

#### DID PAUL REDEFINE “ISRAEL” IN ROMANS 11:26?

In a third argument against a future salvation for all Israel Wright suggests that “Israel” in 11:26 does not have the same sense as “Is-

<sup>23</sup> See Robert L. Saucy, “Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 254.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, “From Wrath to Justification: Tradition, Gospel, and Audience in the Theology of Romans 1:18–4:25,” in *Romans*, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology*, 157.



rael" in verse 25. He says support for this comes from several factors. Romans 9:6 begins the apostle's protracted discussion with a clear redefinition of "Israel." Both in 9:6 and 11:25 a distinction exists within ethnic Israel, and "all Israel" should not be understood as a subset of all Jews. In 10:1–13 Paul argued that salvation comes to *all* who call on the name of the Lord (v. 13), and *all* must be understood universally, referring to more than ethnic Israel. Wright says that the salvation of God for Israel also includes Gentiles, supported by the occurrence of "all" in 11:26, which serves as a parallel to "all" in 10:11–13 (literally, "All who believe in Him will not be put to shame . . . [T]he same Lord is over *all*, enriching *all* who call upon Him"). This redefinition of "Israel" is supported, Wright says, by Paul's redefinition of "the Lord" in 10:13 as Jesus, when in the passage that Paul cites (Joel 2:32) "the Lord" is Yahweh. Thus the true people of God are no longer only Israelites, but are all those aligned with Jesus, including Jews and Gentiles. The context of 11:26 thus requires that "all Israel" not be restricted to ethnic Jews.<sup>25</sup>

Wright says this redefinition is seen in other sections of Romans as well. He says Paul freely redefined "Israel" (in 9:6; 10:16, where οὐ πάντες, "not all," parallels the οὐ πάντες of 9:6 and 2:25–29). Paul, it is argued, also systematically transferred the privileges and attributes of "Israel" to the Messiah and His people, which "people" in some sense is distinct from ethnic Israel and includes Gentiles. Wright sees "all Israel" in 11:26 as "a typically Pauline polemical redefinition, as in Galatians 6:16 [which Wright interprets as a reference to the church], and in line also with Philippians 3:2ff, where the church is described as 'the circumcision.'"<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore this redefinition of the term "Israel" is supported in Wright's opinion by the Old Testament citations in Romans 11:26. He claims that 11:26 presents the restoration of Israel as already taking place in the resurrection of Christ. The texts used by Paul in 11:26 include not only Isaiah 59:20, but also Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 (presumably from Isaiah are the words "for the law and the word of the Lord will go out from Zion" [LXX], and from Micah, "that the law the word of the Lord will go out from Jerusa-

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<sup>25</sup> Wright, "Romans," 690. Though Jack Cottrell ultimately rejects the idea, he offers the suggestion that in 9:24–26 Paul might have conceived of the remnant as consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, which would support Wright's understanding (*Romans*, College Press NIV Commentary [Joplin, MO: College, 1998], 2:283).

<sup>26</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 250.

lem” [LXX], both paralleling “the rescuer will come from Zion,” in Rom. 11:26). Both verses in their Old Testament contexts refer to the Gentile nations hearing the word of the Lord following the restoration of Israel. Wright reasons that since “Zion” has been restored and “fulfilled” by Christ and the church, and the word of the Lord is coming “from Zion” (i.e., Christ is coming to the nations), there is no reason for a special future place for Israel apart from the Messiah and His people, the church. When Israel sees that the blessings intended for her are given to the Gentiles, she will desire the blessings as well and will share in them herself as one part of the Messiah’s people.<sup>27</sup>

Wright’s redefinition of “Israel” can be challenged at several points. First, his claim that “all Israel” refers to the church as a common Pauline “polemical redefinition,” is less than persuasive. It is problematic in 11:26 to understand “all Israel” in a different sense from “Israel” in 11:25 (“a hardening has come on part of Israel”). The immediate context suggests that “Israel” should be understood as a reference to ethnic Israel. Ethnic Israel is referred to in 11:23 (“if they [ethnic Israel] do not continue in unbelief”), and in 11:30–32 in the contrast between Gentiles and Jews.<sup>28</sup> Schreiner draws attention to the contextual clues:

When salvation is promised to “all Israel” in Romans 11:26, it is difficult to believe that Israel should be defined differently in verse 26 than in verse 25. It is scarcely clear that Paul suddenly lurches to a new definition so that verse 25 refers to ethnic Israel whereas verse 26 refers to spiritual Israel. In both verses Paul refers to ethnic Israel, but verse 25 describes the hardening of most of Israel during the time when Gentiles are converted, and verse 26 promises the future salvation of ethnic Israel. Is it possible, though, that Paul suddenly shifts the definition of Israel in verse 26? Yes, it is possible, but the succeeding context reveals that it is implausible and unpersuasive. Romans 11:28–29 confirms that ethnic Israel is the subject of Romans 11:26, for they are enemies of the gospel, but they are beloved by God and the recipients of God’s irrevocable promises because of God’s covenantal promises to the patriarchs. Paul does not restate his argument in Romans 11:28–29 by conceiving of Israel in a spiritual sense, as if Israel comprises believing Jews and Gentiles. Rather, he emphasizes again that ethnic Israel is the object of God’s saving and elect love because of God’s sovereign and effective grace. No contextual

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<sup>27</sup> Wright, “Romans and the Theology of Paul” (1992), 206–7.

<sup>28</sup> As observed by Charles Horne, “The Meaning of the Phrase ‘And Thus All Israel Will Be Saved,’” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (December 1978): 331–32.

warrant appears for widening the definition of Israel. The climax of the mystery is that God will pour out his grace again on ethnic Israel, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>29</sup>

This understanding of "Israel" can hardly be trumped by more remote contexts or by more overly nuanced understandings of "Israel" in Romans or the other Pauline epistles.<sup>30</sup>

In addition Romans 11:25–27 speaks of a specific time when the salvation of Israel will take place, namely, after the cessation of Israel's hardening and the arrival of the fullness of the Gentiles. Wright implies that the salvation of all Israel—which, in his thinking, takes place alongside the Gentiles in the church—happens in an iterative fashion throughout the present age.<sup>31</sup> However, this is unlikely in light of the chronological markers, most notably ἄχρι οὗ ("until") and σωθήσεται, the future of σώζω ("will be saved").<sup>32</sup> Wright offers no interpretation of ἄχρι οὗ, and it is precisely here that his argument is weakest. The presence of the phrase appears to be irreconcilable with his position. If there is a hardening on Israel *until* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in, after which time it is lifted, then one cannot say that the salvation of all Israel takes place *throughout* the church age. The future tense verb σωθήσεται ("will be saved") suggests that this salvation was something Paul anticipated and expected, and not something that would be a gradual process in his day.<sup>33</sup> Something more momentous seems to be

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 477–78.

<sup>30</sup> Though it does not seem to carry much weight with Wright and others, Christopher Zoccali points out that "throughout chs. 9–11, outside perhaps 9:6 and 11:26, 'Israel' unquestionably refers to the historical nation as distinct from the Gentiles (9:[4], 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:[1], 2, 7, 11, 23, 25; see 15:8–12)" ("'And So All Israel Will Be Saved': Competing Interpretations of Romans 11:26 in Pauline Scholarship," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 [2008]: 295). The implication is that "Israel" in 11:26–27 also likely refers to the Jewish people. In addition the wild olive branches (Gentile believers) that are grafted into the cultivated olive tree in 11:16–17 do not become cultivated branches. They remain wild branches grafted "contrary to nature," though they benefit from the rich root. The cultivated branches remain cultivated branches without losing their distinctiveness.

<sup>31</sup> Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul" (1992), 204, 207.

<sup>32</sup> See Terence L. Donaldson, "'Riches for the Gentiles' (Rom. 11:12): Israel's Rejection and Paul's Gentile Mission," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 92–94. He makes a strong case for understanding ἄχρι οὗ as a support for the future salvation of ethnic Israel.

<sup>33</sup> Paralleling Wright's points, Dongsu Kim maintains that σωθήσεται ("will be saved") is a gnomic future and cannot be pressed to bear a future temporal reference ("Reading Paul's καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται [Rom. 11:26a] in the Context of

in Paul's words than the periodic conversion of some Jews throughout the present era. In addition Paul's redefinition of "Israel" in 9:6 and 2:25 is explained by Paul contextually in those passages.<sup>34</sup> But no such explanation is given by the apostle in 11:26. Therefore how can these verses suggest a "redefinition of Israel" to mean the church in this age?

Third, regarding the supposed citation of Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 rather than Isaiah 59:20 in Romans 11:26, Wright seems to be pressing his point. Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 have different contexts than Isaiah 59:20. The two verses in question refer to a time when the kingdom of Israel is restored in its fullness, with God governing the nation and through it the world. Isaiah 59:20, however, is

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Romans," *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 [2010]: 326). He cites for support the gnomic futures in Romans 5:7 ("scarcely will die"), Galatians 6:5 ("will bear his own load") and Matthew 4:4 ("shall not live by bread alone"). When viewed from the vantage point of verbal aspect, it is true that the future tense does not bear a temporal reference, but it does indicate the *expectation* of an event, in this case Israel's salvation.

See Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 2:44. Regarding the characteristics of the gnomic future, Daniel B. Wallace writes, "The future is very rarely used to indicate the likelihood that a *generic* event will take place. The idea is not that a particular event is in view, but that such events are true to life" (*Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 571). It is unlikely that Kim's contention that "all Israel will be saved" denotes a *generic*, nonparticular act. The salvation of Israel is hardly generic. If the salvation of all Israel were to take place throughout the church age (and even during Paul's day), then Paul might have used the present tense more advantageously, viewing this salvation as an unfolding process.

<sup>34</sup> Franz Mussner observes that Paul explained what he said in Romans 9:6 ("they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel") in 9:7, where he discussed the physical descendants of Abraham ("Abraham's descendants . . . through Isaac"), not a mixed group constituting the church, and in 9:8 ("it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants"). The phrase οἱ τοῖς Ἰσραήλ ("belong to Israel," 9:6) has a limiting significance, referring only to those Jews who have been obedient to the gospel. In this case the term "Israel" is used in a manner different from its typical usage, but without including Gentile Christians in "Israel." The unique usage is evident from the limitation drawn by Paul, a limitation defined by the "choice" mentioned in 9:6 (*Tractate on the Jews: The Significance of Judaism for Christian Faith*, trans. Leonard Swidler [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 28–29). Mussner writes, "The 'choice' refers to the people of Israel: some of which—in 11:5, 'a remnant, chosen by grace'—God chose in a free choice and they listened to the gospel; the others from it—in 11:7b 'the rest'—God hardened and they did not listen to the gospel. A partial 'hardening' came upon Israel (11:25)" (*ibid.*). Otherwise, however, Paul in Romans 9–11 used the terms "Israel" monosemantically.

Mussner affirms that the use of Ἰσραήλ in 11:26 does not include Gentiles, nor does it refer to the church. But, as the context indicates (most notably, the remnant discussed in 11:1–10 along with the hardened part in 11:25), it includes the saved remnant and the hardened of Israel (*ibid.*, 30). The point is that when Paul redefined "Israel" in 9:6, the context clearly indicates that he was doing so. There is no similar indication of such a redefinition in 11:26.

found in the context of the Isaianic new covenant, in the context of forgiveness of sins. The passage relates chronologically to the restoration of Israel (60:1–9) as a harbinger of it and as a precursor of Israel's influence on the nations,<sup>35</sup> not as something that will take place after it, as Wright maintains. Paul's main point is forgiveness of sins for Israel (πάς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται . . . ἀποστρέψει ἀσεβείας ἀπὸ Ἰακώβ, "all Israel will be saved. . . . He will remove ungodliness from Jacob"), which befits the context of Isaiah 59:20, as well as of Isaiah 27:9. Paul was not citing Isaiah 59:20 and 27:9 as proof that the Messiah or His word will be made available to all the nations. The apostle instead cited these verses as proof that God promised that the people Israel will experience forgiveness of sins, demonstrably through the new covenant.<sup>36</sup> Also Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 refer to the law and the word of God going out from Zion/Jerusalem; they do not refer to a Redeemer. All this implies that Paul did not have Isaiah 2:3 and Micah 4:2 in mind in Romans 11:26–27.

#### DO GENTILES HAVE GROUNDS TO BOAST AGAINST ISRAEL?

In his fourth argument against the mass salvation of all Israel, Wright makes much of the idea that Gentiles in Rome should not boast against the Jews.<sup>37</sup> But it seems that this is exactly what Wright's position would encourage Gentiles to do. If Jewish believers become part of the church with no distinction, and if there is no future salvation for them as an independent people group, then Gentiles might actually have grounds to be grateful for their pre-

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<sup>35</sup> Even those from such diverse backgrounds as the following writers agree that God's deliverance of Israel precedes her illuminating the nations: A. Rofé, "Isaiah 59:19 and Trito-Isaiah's Vision of Redemption," in *The Book of Isaiah-Le Livre d'Isaïe: Les Oracles et Leurs Relectures Unité et Complexité de L'Ouvrage*, ed. Jacques Vermeylen, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1989), 409–10; W. A. M. Beuken, "The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah: 'The Servants of YHWH,'" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 70–71; James Muilenburg, "The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick et al. (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 5:695–97; E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 445; and John A. Martin, "Isaiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996), 1114–15.

<sup>36</sup> On the function of the Old Testament citations in Romans 11:27 see the discussion below.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 251, and elsewhere.

ferred position in God's program. There were more Gentiles being saved than Jews; and Jews were broken off to accommodate them. If there were no extensive salvation of the Jews in the future, then perhaps the Gentiles *are* superior to the Jews. But Wright would not want to say this. His position seems to be inconsistent.

### CONCLUSION

Wright contends that Romans 11:25–27, as it is traditionally understood, is inconsistent with what Paul maintained elsewhere regarding the Jews' lack of privilege (on the basis of their ancestry), in relation to salvation. Indeed, it is this opinion that forces Wright to reject the large-scale salvation of Jews as Jews in 11:25–32. But he may be missing a crucial point from earlier in Romans 11. In verse 1 the apostle used himself as proof that God had not cast away His people. Paul saw himself as part of the Jewish remnant on the basis of the electing grace of God, not on the basis of his Jewishness.<sup>38</sup>

Wright objects to the idea that there is a mass, distinct, and future conversion of the Jewish people precisely because they are Jews. He feels this contradicts what Paul says elsewhere about there being no distinction between how Jews and Gentiles are saved. Wright is correct in drawing attention to an inconsistency if 11:25–27 says the Jews are saved because they are Jews. But he is wrong in overlooking the possibility that this mass salvation of all Israel could be accomplished totally through God's gracious election of an enormous number of individual Jews, no different in manner from the salvation of individual Gentiles. If God chooses to elect enough individual Jews so that they form a saved "all Israel," He is free to do so (9:14–23). But as Paul has shown throughout Romans 9, this election is not based on ethnicity or ancestral ties to Abraham (9:6–13), but on the freely and sovereignly bestowed grace of God and His elective decree (11:5–6, 7–10, 17–24). In this sense the salvation of all Israel can be both a mass redemption of individual ethnic Jews distinct from the church at a specific time in the future, and yet can be a salvation that does not differ from that of the Gentiles in that it is based on God's unconstrained bestowal of grace, as Paul argued previously in 3:9, 21–31; 9:23–33; 10:12–

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<sup>38</sup> For evidence in support of this understanding see Michael G. Vanlaningham, *Christ, the Savior of Israel: An Evaluation of the Dual Covenant and Sonderweg Interpretations of Paul's Letters*, Edition Israelogic (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2012), 142–76.

13.<sup>39</sup> Thus if Wright's starting point is wrong, as it seems to be, his ensuing arguments are skewed as a result. Despite the potency of his assertions, Wright's view that "Israel" in Romans 11:26 refers to the church consisting of Jewish and Gentile believers is not the most compelling understanding of the evidence.

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<sup>39</sup> For this point see Donald A. Hagner, "Paul's Quarrel with Judaism," in *Anti-Semitism and Early Christianity: Issues of Polemic and Faith*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Donald A. Hagner (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 145–49. Moo makes much the same point, plus additional nuances, first, that while there was a continuing validity to the corporate election of Israel, this corporate election is qualified by individual election (i.e., not all who are descended from Israel are Israel, 9:6; and see the whole section of 9:6–29). And second, Moo notes, "Nor does Paul's teaching about the freedom of God to elect whomever he chooses mean that God cannot take into consideration ethnic identity; only that ethnic identity is never the *basis* for God's choice" (*Romans*, 737–39). This is seen not only in Romans 9:6–29, but also in 11:1–10 and 11:28–32. In all three passages the determinative factor in being right with God is His grace and mercy, not being Jewish.