

ISRAEL AND HER VOCATION: THE FOURTH STAGE OF ROMANS 11

Paul A. Himes

ABSTRACT

Some scholars speak of three stages of Israel's salvation history in Romans 11. A closer examination, however, reveals that Paul delineates four stages in Romans 11, with the fourth stage representing the bountiful harvest reaped as a result of Israel reclaiming her vocation and mission to the world. Attention to this four-stage scheme may help mitigate the stereotype of dispensationalism as a gloomy doctrine portraying each era as a failure, since both the church and Israel will, in fact, complete the mission to which God has called them.

INTRODUCTION

WHEN DISCUSSING ROMANS 11, some scholars refer to three “stages” of salvation history, especially in verses 11–12 and 15.¹ In this reading, “Israel” (however defined) stumbles and Gentiles receive salvation, in the process provoking Israel

Paul A. Himes is professor of biblical studies, Baptist College of Ministry, Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin.

¹ John K. Goodrich, “The Word of God Has Not Failed: God’s Faithfulness and Israel’s Salvation in Tobit 14:3–7 and Romans 9–11,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (2016): 44; Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 684; Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary*, New Testament Monographs 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 209. C. K. Barrett refers to “stages” but does not specify the number. C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Black’s New Testament Commentary (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962), 213. Grant Osborne speaks of “four stages” in Romans 9:11–16, but his use of “stages” seems to be less about salvation history and more about the various reasons for Israel’s rejection. Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic), 290–91.

to jealousy and prompting an ultimate reconciliation of Israel.² However, the text seems to indicate not merely three stages of Israel's salvation history, but four stages, with the fourth represented by two elements in Romans 11: *πῶς μᾶλλον* in verse 12 and *ζωὴ ἐκ νεκρῶν* in verse 15. This fourth stage involves Israel yet benefits Gentiles. Approaching the issue from a broadly dispensational theological framework, this article will argue that this fourth stage involves Israel's recovery of her original vocation of being a blessing to the Gentiles, a recovery that will occur in the final era of history. The first part of this article will briefly examine Israel's theological vocation in relation to the Gentiles, arguing that this vocation did not end with the crucifixion of Israel's Messiah. The central part of the article will focus on Romans 9–11, especially chapter 11. The final part will comment on the possible relationship of Romans 11 to Revelation 7, while also noting implications for understanding a pretribulational rapture and for the expression of dispensationalism as a positive, success-oriented theology.

ISRAEL'S VOCATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Israel's theological vocation in the Old Testament has largely been overlooked in studies of Pauline theology *vis-à-vis* Romans 9–11, notwithstanding some excellent work by James Dunn and Lionel Windsor. Scholarship almost universally acknowledges, however, that Israel's role as God's people included ministering to the Gentiles. Michael Vlach states, "God does not intend for Israel to be an end in itself. Israel is not an end but a means—a means for worldwide blessings."³ These sentiments are mirrored by many, regardless of hermeneutical framework.⁴

² This basic framework does not seem to be controversial, though opinions vary on the specific nature of the progression or stages, as well as the identity of Israel.

³ Michael Vlach, "What about Israel?," in *Christ's Prophetic Plans: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer*, ed. John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody, 2012), 109.

⁴ Thus N. T. Wright can speak of Israel's "covenant of vocation." N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion* (New York: HarperCollins, 2016), 240, cf. 211–12. See also Michael F. Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, Library of New Testament Studies 331 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 126; Jerry Hwang, "The 'Missio Dei' as an Integrative Motif in the Book of Jeremiah," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23, no. 4 (2013): 481–508; Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 407; and Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 358–62.

Within the Old Testament Israel's mission does seem to be *mostly* passive, and this seems to be the general perspective of modern scholarship.⁵ One may argue, however, that this passivity has been overstated. Significantly, in Deuteronomy 4:6, the pagan nations will not just hear about Israel, but rather will hear the Law itself (הַשְׁמַעוּן אֵת כָּל-הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה), which may imply a more active proclamation. Similarly, "they will declare my praise" in Isaiah 43:21 (תְּהַלְתִּי יִסְפְּרוּ) seems to imply an audience.⁶

Meanwhile, the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles in New Testament theology seems to evidence a continuity between Jewish vocation in the Old Testament and the Gentile mission. Thus Michael Bird writes,

It appears that the Gentile mission emerged from a cocoon of Jewish eschatological expectation that anticipated God's final purposes for the nations as reaching their climax through Israel and the temple. . . . Jesus never envisaged a Gentile mission as a separate entity from a Jewish mission, but believed that the continuing Jewish mission would result in the gospel being proclaimed to Gentiles along the way.⁷

Furthermore, the apostle Paul himself seems to have considered his own Gentile mission as a continuation of Israel's vocation. James D. G. Dunn states, "Paul saw his own apostolic work not as a disowning of his heritage, but precisely as its fulfilment—apostle *to the Gentiles*, as apostle *of Israel*."⁸ Lionel J. Windsor, while disa-

⁵ Grisanti offers an excellent survey of scholarship on this topic, noting how academia after the 1950s has trended towards a "centripetal" rather than "centrifugal" perspective regarding Israel's relationship to the nations. Michael A. Grisanti, "Israel's Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40–55: An Update," *Master's Seminary Journal* 9 no. 1 (Spring 1998): 40–54. See also Jason S. DeRouchie, *How to Understand and Apply the Old Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 403–7; and Eckhard J. Schnabel, "Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45 no. 1 (March 2002): 38.

⁶ A shift does seem to occur in later prophetic passages that portray Israel as having a more active role in reaching the nations. Thus even Eckhard Schnabel, while arguing for an overall passive sense of Israel's mission, nonetheless states, "The active, deliberate, and planned outreach to non-Israelites with the goal of convincing them of the exclusive salvific truth and power of YHWH is, in the OT, part of prophetic *eschatology*" ("Israel, the People of God, and the Nations," 39). In addition, Isaiah 66:19 may be a clear indication of an explicitly active evangelistic role for Israel, if the pronoun "them" in the first clause of verse 19 refers to Israelites (in defense of this, see John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 688–89; and Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: The English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972], 532).

⁷ Bird, *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission*, 172.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, "Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel," *Zeitschrift für die*

greeing with Dunn on some key points, builds on Dunn's work: "For Paul, Jewishness was a divine occupation. Paul, as a Jew, was fulfilling a distinct and pre-eminent role in God's worldwide eschatological purposes. Paul's apostolic mission to the Gentiles, in other words, was not merely *influenced* by his Jewish past; it *was* his expression of Jewishness."⁹ Windsor further demonstrates how in Romans 9–11 "Paul's own [Jewish] identity is not merely a prominent *feature* of Rom 9–11; it also forms the *framework* of his argument"; thus in "Rom 9:1–3, 10:1–2, 11:1, . . . these three self-references also correspond close to the *propositions* (9:6, 10:4, 11:1–2) of the three subsections."¹⁰ In other words, Paul's own identity *as a Jew* factors into how he views his mission from God.¹¹

However, throughout Romans 9–11, Paul realizes that he represents an exception to the norm. All Israel was to be involved in reaching the Gentiles, for in Romans 10:9–10 Paul makes clear that "speech" was to be "a fundamental mode of Israel's response to the Law"; indeed, "believing and speaking are, for Paul, two sides of the same soteriological coin. . . . The right response to the Law is to believe *and* to speak."¹² The Messiah's incarnation, death, and resurrection did not do away with Israel's vocation, but rather should have given new impetus to it, as it did to some degree in Acts. Nonetheless, all Israel has *not* been involved in such soteriological proclamation, and thus "had failed to achieve its divine vocation."¹³ In other words, in the current stage of salvation history, only a minority, a "remnant," are actually fulfilling Israel's vocation (Rom 9:1–5). Without a doubt, in the modern era, Gentile Christians have been much more involved in the proclamation of God's glory.

neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der alteren Kirche 89, nos. 3–4 (1998): 258.

⁹ Lionel J. Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel: How Paul's Jewish Identity Informs His Apostolic Ministry, with Special Reference to Romans*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 205 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 196–97.

¹¹ As Longenecker states, "Paul's conviction regarding the future salvation of a 'all Israel' was very much a part of his Christian proclamation. His whole ministry to pagan Gentiles was in fact conditioned by such a positive expectation for the people of Israel." Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 898.

¹² Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel*, 218–19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 241

ISRAEL'S FOURTH STAGE OF RESTORATION IN ROMANS 11

If Israel's mission involved proclamation of the glories of God to the pagans, and if she failed in that mission, then one must turn to Romans 9–11 to understand how and why she will recover her status and her mission. This article will briefly discuss the significance of Romans 9–11 before examining how Romans 11 seems to speak to ethnic Israel's recovery of her vocation of witness.

Those who wish to grapple with the theology of Romans 9–11 must take into account Paul's own emotional state at the beginning and end of this section.¹⁴ His heartbreaking cry in 9:1–3 may, in fact, show an awareness that his success in the Gentile mission has dovetailed with, even impacted, Israel's own sad state.¹⁵ Regardless, the emotional state of Paul at the beginning drives his progression of thought, which somehow culminates in his doxological outburst in 11:33–36. This final declaration of joy would be inexplicable had Paul merely realized that the status quo would be maintained, that ethnic Israel by and large would continue to reject the Messiah. To the contrary, Paul's joyous expression at the end must be the result of something positive Paul has discovered about the fate of ethnic Israel.¹⁶

Consequently, Romans 9–11 is not about the Gentile church replacing Israel, Paul's own kinsmen "according to the flesh" (9:3),¹⁷ but rather about ethnic Israel herself.¹⁸ Even Romans 9:6

¹⁴ Frey appropriately describes this passage as "part of an intellectual wrestling of the apostle with God and Scripture in view of his own missionary experience." Jörg Frey, "Demythologizing Apocalyptic?: On N. T. Wright's Paul, Apocalyptic Interpretation, and the Constraints of Construction," in *God and the Faithfulness of Paul*, ed. Christoph Heilig, J. Thomas Hewitt, and Michael F. Bird (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 525. In addition, Windsor appropriately notes how Paul's "own identity" is bound up with the "framework of his argument" (*Paul and the Vocation of Israel*, 196, emphasis original).

¹⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 541.

¹⁶ Wolter states, "Thus Paul has become certain in 11:26 of what he had expressed in Rom 10:1 as his deepest desire and prayer—that even the non-Christian portion of Israel would come 'to salvation' (εἰς σωτηρίαν)" ("Damit ist Paulus das, was er in Röm 10.1 noch als Herzenswunsch und Gebetsanliegen geäußert hatte - dass auch die nichtchristliche Mehrheit Israels 'zum Heil' (εἰς σωτηρίαν) gelangen möge -, in 11.26 zur Gewissheit geworden"). Michael Wolter, "Ein exegetischer und theologischer Blick auf Röm 11:25–32," *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 2 (April 2018): 126.

¹⁷ Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (2016), unless otherwise noted.

¹⁸ When speaking about Paul's slightly altered quotation of Isaiah 59:20 in Romans 11:26, Kirk points out, "Paul's concern is not merely to say that Gentiles are

represents not a broadening of the term “Israel” (as if to include Gentiles) but rather a narrowing of the term (with “true Israel” consisting of those Jews who have accepted the Messiah).¹⁹ Furthermore, “Paul’s claim that ‘not all who are from Israel are Israel’ (9:6) does not cause him to rest content with the current unbelieving state of ethnic Israel; he insists throughout Romans 11 that more Israelites, a preponderance of Israel even, must be brought in so as to confirm God’s faithfulness to his electing grace.”²⁰

Consequently, οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται in Romans 11:26 naturally refers to ethnic Israel. If Paul truly believed that “the church, consisting of believing Jews and Christians, represents the eschatological restoration of Israel,”²¹ then Romans 11:11–25 would become difficult to fit within Paul’s broader argument, and Paul’s change from sorrow over his ethnic kin (9:1–3) to glorious hope (11:33–36) would be inexplicable. Indeed, Romans 11:26 would simply express a tautology where absolutely nothing had changed since Paul began his agonizing theological meditation in 9:1.²²

This οὕτως in 11:26 most naturally indicates that verse 25 is chronologically and logically prior to the salvation of “all Israel.”²³ As noted earlier, a few scholars suggest that Romans 11 develops a three-stage process for the restoration of Israel. Goodrich, for example, outlines these three phases: (1) “Israel’s rejection;” (2) “the

included. In point of fact, this reality creates the problem Paul is attempting to resolve throughout Rom. 9–11. Culminating his argument in these chapters with scriptural proof that Gentiles will be included would move the ground from beneath his own feet. Romans 4 was sufficient to prove that Gentiles are included in the blessings of Israel, Rom. 9–11 intends to speak to the fate and future of ethnic Israel given this Gentile inclusion.” J. R. Daniel Kirk, “Why Does the Deliverer Come ἐκ Σιών (Romans 11.26)?,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 1 (2010): 87.

¹⁹ Michael A. Rydelnik, “Israel: Why the Church Must Be Raptured before the Tribulation,” in *Evidence for the Rapture: A Biblical Case for Pretribulationism*, ed. John F. Hart (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 268.

²⁰ Kirk, “Why Does the Deliverer Come ἐκ Σιών,” 95.

²¹ As stated by Schnabel, “Israel, the People of God, and the Nations,” 54.

²² For some of the better treatments of “all Israel” referring to ethnic Israel, see John K. Goodrich, “Until the Fullness of the Gentiles Comes In: A Critical Review of Recent Scholarship on the Salvation of ‘All Israel’ (Romans 11:26),” *Journal for the Study of Paul & His Letters* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 5–32; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 623; Wolter, “Ein exegetischer und theologischer Blick,” 125–26.

²³ Wolter, “Ein exegetischer und theologischer Blick,” 127–29, esp. 129. For another helpful treatment of the possible meanings of οὕτως, see Goodrich, “Until the Fullness of the Gentiles Comes In,” 27.

world's reconciliation;" (3) "Israel's acceptance/life from the dead."²⁴ Thus, as Kirk states, "The narrative of salvation history that Paul articulates in Rom. 11 is anything if not consistent: Israel's partial hardening leads to the inclusion of the Gentiles, and this inclusion of the Gentiles is itself the means by which Israel will come to participate in God's saving work."²⁵

Romans 11, however, reads even more consistently as explicitly indicating a *fourth* stage, where Israel's return to her former status directly leads to "life from the dead" for Gentiles. Farla has aptly argued that in Romans 11:13–32, "if Paul looked to the premise of the actual division of Israel when explaining Israel's current situation, he is now looking to the beginning, to God's election of Israel, and towards God's ultimate purpose, when speaking of the eschatological future (see 11,26–27b.28–32)."²⁶ When Paul reminds his audience that "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (11:29), could he also be implying that when Israel is restored she will also embrace her mission to the world?

The rhetoric of Romans 11 seems to indicate this. First, Windsor argues that for Paul the "calling" word group (καλεῖν, κλησῖς, κλητός) and the "election" word group (ἐκλέγεσθαι, ἐκλογή, ἐκλεκτός) often point to Israel's "Jewish vocation."²⁷ Arguably, then, "vocation" is a significant thematic undercurrent in Romans 9–11. Second, in Romans 11:12 and 15, Paul uses a lesser-to-greater argument to declare that if Israel's rejection has benefitted the rest of

²⁴ Goodrich, "Until the Fullness of the Gentiles Comes In," 29; similarly, Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 712; Porter, *The Letter to the Romans*, 209; Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 257–58; John F. Walvoord, "Eschatological Problems IX: Israel's Restoration," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102, no. 408 (Oct 1945): 415. Interestingly, Goodrich notes that within intertestamental literature, Tobit 14:5–7 sees Gentiles being converted along with Israel in "phase 3" (Goodrich, "The Word of God Has Not Failed," 50).

²⁵ Kirk, "Why Does the Deliverer Come ἐκ Σιών," 90.

²⁶ Piet Farla, " 'Christ Replaces the Law,—but Israel Remains the People of God': The Rhetorical *dispositio* of Romans 1,13–11, 36," *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 93, no. 4 (Dec 2017): 628, translated by Brian Heffernan.

²⁷ Windsor further states, "Although we are not claiming that our concept of 'vocation' is derived directly from any particular Pauline lexeme, nevertheless there is at certain points an implicit connection between certain Pauline uses of 'calling' and 'election' vocabulary and the more general concept of Israel's divine vocation (see also Rom 11:28–29). Furthermore, the concept of Israel's vocation is implied by Paul's frequent discussions of Israel and/or Jews as (perhaps unwitting) instruments in God's wider plan of salvation for the 'Gentiles' (ἔθνη) or for 'all' (πᾶς) people. As we shall see, however, it is most explicit in passages where Paul himself evokes Jewish identity while discussing ministry to the Gentiles" (Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel*, 12–13).

the world, her restoration will provide even greater benefit.²⁸ The two verses indicate a progression culminating in a fourth stage, which seems to indicate a positive effect on the Gentile world.

	Stage 1: Negative Situation for Israel	Stage 2: Positive State for Gentiles	Stage 3: Positive State for Israel	Stage 4: Even More Positive State for Gentiles
Verse 12	τὸ παράπτωμα . . . τὸ ἥτημα	πλοῦτος κόσμος . . . πλοῦτος ἐθνῶν	τὸ πλήρωμα ²⁹	πόσω μᾶλλον
Verse 15	ἡ ἀποβολή ³⁰	καταλλαγὴ κόσμου	ἡ πρόσλημις	ζωὴ ἐκ νεκρῶν

Embedded within Paul’s rhetoric is a comparative analogy: just as A is to B, so C is to D, except to an even greater degree. Thus stage 3 leads to something that is even more significant than what stage 1 led to. Stage 4 overlaps with stage 3 (without being exactly concurrent); however, the same could be said about stages 1 and 2 (Israel’s “failure” leads into yet overlaps with “riches for the Gentiles”). Consequently, it is consistent with Paul’s “lesser-to-greater” language to speak of four stages rather than three. Furthermore, if Paul is consistent, then stage 4 must be a “greater” version of stage 2, which leads into our discussion of “life from the dead.”

In verse 12, the “more positive” result for the rest of the world is left unstated. In verse 15, however, it is described as “life from the dead.” Scholars generally posit either a figurative or a literal interpretation, where the former would be “a spiritual vivification”

²⁸ Or, as Vlach succinctly states, “What happens now is good, but it gets much better.” Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 452.

²⁹ As Blaising points out, “The fullness [of Israel] here is contrasted to the part, the remnant, which is being saved in the present time (11:7–26).” Craig A. Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44, no. 3 (Sept 2001): 438. Logically, then, this “fullness” is not something that impacts the current church but rather something that involves a future Israel.

³⁰ With the phrase “Israel’s rejection,” it may be that the emphasis should be on Israel’s rejection of God rather than God’s rejection of Israel. For a strong case that the word αὐτῶν in ἡ ἀποβολὴ αὐτῶν is a subjective rather than objective genitive, see Jim R. Sibley, “Has the Church Put Israel on the Shelf? The Evidence from Romans 11:15,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 3 (2015): 571–81.

that impacts the entire world via Israel's conversion, and the latter refers to "the final resurrection itself."³¹

Douglas Moo, in one of the more thorough defenses of the latter position, gives the following three arguments: (1) In Scripture, "from the dead" overwhelmingly refers to a literal resurrection. (2) Since this "life from the dead" happens after Israel's redemption, and since "vv. 25–26 suggest that the salvation of Israel comes only after God has brought into the kingdom all the Gentiles destined to be saved, no room is left for a spiritual quickening of the world; all that remains is the consummation."³² (3) "Since we are justified in thinking that Paul builds his teaching here on apocalyptic, a reference to resurrection at the end of history seems likely."³³

In response to Moo's first point, it should be noted that none of the other occurrences of ἐκ followed by νεκρός involve the word ζωή, so Paul's expression in Romans 11:15 is unique.³⁴ Furthermore, Joseph Fitzmyer points out that Paul's normal expression for the event of the resurrection is ἀνάστασις νεκρῶν (e.g., Rom 6:5, 1 Cor 15).³⁵ In addition, Moo himself has acknowledged Romans 6:13 as a key exception to the reference of "out of the dead," though he suggests that ὡσεὶ there indicates a figurative meaning.³⁶ Significantly, though, Romans 6:13 is the only place in Pauline literature

³¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 562–63.

³² Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 694; similarly Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 563.

³³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 696. See also Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 215; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*, Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 329; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 658; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, 2nd ed., Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 582; Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 269.

³⁴ The Accordance command line "ζωή <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> εκ <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> νεκρός" yields only the one result. Lexical and syntactical searches were performed using Accordance 11 (OakTree, 2016).

³⁵ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 613. Similarly, Murray writes, "One wonders why [Paul] did not use the term occurring so frequently in his epistles. . . . This expression 'resurrection from the dead' is the standard one with Paul and other New Testament speakers and writers to denote the resurrection." John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, 2 vols. in 1, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:83. See also Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 411.

³⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 694.

where ἐκ νεκρῶν occurs within five words of ζῶω,³⁷ and since, as noted, Romans 11:15 alone contains a similar construction involving ζωή, it is more likely that both are figurative than that one is figurative and the other literal.

On Moo's second point, this article will argue below that the "fullness of the Gentiles" (11:25) does not refer to all the Gentiles destined to be saved from every era. As for Moo's third point, an apocalyptic framework hardly necessitates a reference to the first resurrection of Revelation 20:6; other key apocalyptic events will happen in the future. The restoration of Israel and her subsequent ability to minister to the Gentiles is itself an apocalyptic event in the minds of the Old Testament prophets (e.g., Jer 3:16–18).

More importantly, the lesser-to-greater argument of verses 12 and 15 seems to indicate that stage 4 specifically benefits Gentiles. Many scholars do well to focus on the parallelism in this passage but do not take it far enough.³⁸ If stage 2 benefits Gentiles, and if stage 1 leading to stage 2 parallels stage 3 leading to stage 4, then one should naturally expect stage 4 also to benefit Gentiles. Yet the general resurrection of the dead is not of specific benefit to Gentiles; indeed, it will be quite detrimental to those Gentiles not converted! Thus ζωὴ ἐκ νεκρῶν makes more sense "as an unprecedented quickening for the world in the expansion and success of the gospel" than as a general resurrection of both Jewish and Gentile believers.³⁹ Following the logic of lesser-to-greater, Israel's restoration and consequent recovery of her vocation could easily lead to massive Gentile conversion, an explosion of salvation that would outpace even the years following Pentecost.⁴⁰ In other words, though the Gentile church has been reaching the world for centuries, Israel's reclamation of her vocation will result in greater missionary success during the Tribulation and/or the millennium.

³⁷ Accordance command line "ἐκ <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> νεκρός <WITHIN 5 Words> ζῶω." First Peter 1:3 also fits these criteria, but there the verb precedes ἐκ by five words.

³⁸ Thomas Schreiner, for example, notes, "The parallelism of verse 15 with verse 12 implies that something more obtains from the salvation of the Jews ('how much more their fullness!')" (Schreiner, *Romans*, 599). However, he does not take the parallelism far enough.

³⁹ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2:84.

⁴⁰ Charles Feinberg suggests that the common interpretation of Matthew 24:14 as referring to the task of the church is mistaken. Instead, the context indicates that this task belongs to Israel during the Great Tribulation (Feinberg, *Israel: At the Center of History and Revelation*, 187). Feinberg's suggestion resonates well with the thesis of this paper, though more work needs to be done here in dispensational theology.

In light of all this, one must also examine the meaning of πλήρωμα in Romans 11:12 and 11:25 (even as recently as 2007 Jewett was able to speak of “the unresolved debate over the interpretation of τὸ πλήρωμα αὐτῶν”).⁴¹ One should acknowledge, at the outset, that the passages are likely parallel. Thus whatever the “fullness” of Israel is in 11:12, the “fullness” of Gentiles in 11:25 must be something similar.⁴² Furthermore, when read in parallel, the fullness of the Gentiles seems to be the historical hinge that leads to the fullness of the Israelites.

The term πλήρωμα can be either qualitative or quantitative, and good arguments exist for each.⁴³ Much of scholarship attributes the sense of “full number” to πλήρωμα in both verses.⁴⁴ However, to suggest that “the Gentiles’ ‘fullness’ involves a numerical completion” and implies “the idea of a fixed number of people whom God has destined for salvation” surely reads too much into the word.⁴⁵ Indeed, πλήρωμα is not the precise language of specific finality (i.e., “every single last member”), but of general fullness within a particular context (e.g., Philo, *Praemii* 109—the “fullness” of a house full of a large family) or simply of “completeness” (Rom 13:10).⁴⁶ Thus Hultgren states, “The fullness of the Gentiles can mean, then, the Gentiles without restriction, people of all the Gentile ‘nations.’”⁴⁷ “The fullness of the Gentiles [coming] in” thus speaks of a bountiful harvest of salvation reaped from every nation

⁴¹ Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 677.

⁴² As noted by Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 428–29, among others.

⁴³ See especially Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 689–90, for one of the best discussions; see also Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*. Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 345.

⁴⁴ E.g., Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 428–29; Schreiner, *Romans*, 581; Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 214; Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 342; Jewett, *Romans*, 678.

⁴⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 719. He offers 4 Ezra 4:35–37 as a parallel, suggesting that Paul is borrowing ideas from Jewish apocalyptic. So also Jewett, *Romans*, 678. However, 4 Ezra, written after the fall of Jerusalem, is of limited value for interpreting Romans.

⁴⁶ Interestingly, πλήρωμα in reference to people seems to be somewhat rare, which probably strengthens the idea that generality, not a specific number, is in view. Even so, Jewett is correct to point out that πλήρωμα ἔθνους could be used “to describe the entire citizenry in a Greek polis” (Jewett, *Romans*, 677).

⁴⁷ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 418. Note also Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 134–35, and Witherington and Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 267.

before the final eschatological era.⁴⁸ To read τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν as “every single Gentile who would ever get saved” may run the same risk as an overly precise approach to πᾶς Ἰσραήλ in 11:26, as if it necessarily means “every single Israelite who ever lived” rather than simply “an overwhelming amount.”⁴⁹

Thus whatever τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰσέλθη refers to, it clearly precedes Israel’s corporate conversion.⁵⁰ However, this does not necessitate a reference to “the very end of the age,” since “the apostle Paul does not say as much when he easily could have (cf. ‘until the Lord comes,’ 1 Cor 4:5; 11:26).”⁵¹ Indeed, this “fullness of the Gentiles” cannot be “the completion of Gentile salvation,” for as Saucy notes, “that interpretation leaves no time for the Old Testament picture of the blessings of Gentiles *subsequent to* and *mediated through* a restored Israel. . . . There must yet be some time following the coming in of this ‘fullness’ that permits the even greater blessing of the world to take place.”⁵² In other words, though for Paul “the full redemption of Israel *awaits the completion of the Gentile mission*,”⁵³ nonetheless, as Konkel argues, “it is a mistake to think that the triumph of the Gentile mission and the growth and success of the church accomplishes God’s elective purposes. . . . There remains an Israel elected by God that must fulfill its purpose for all salvation to be complete.”⁵⁴

Thus the “fullness of the Gentiles” probably refers neither to the Parousia nor the last elect Gentile being saved. Indeed, for premillennial dispensationalists, both Jews and Gentiles will continue to be saved in the millennium.⁵⁵ A more general sense of

⁴⁸ In addition, as Morris suggests, “We should probably see a reference to the fulfilment of God’s purpose in bringing Gentiles into his kingdom, however we understand the individual words” (Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 420).

⁴⁹ Longenecker explains that “all Israel” in 11:26 refers generally to “the salvation of Jewish people who will be alive when the course of God’s salvation history is brought by God himself to its culmination,” not to “every single Israelite” or even “every single elect Jew” (Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 897).

⁵⁰ Goodrich, “Until the Fullness of the Gentiles Comes In,” 29–30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 31. See also Kirk, “Why Does the Deliverer Come ἐκ Σιῶν,” 89.

⁵² Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 259, 261.

⁵³ J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 277.

⁵⁴ August H. Konkel, “What Is the Future of Israel in Romans 9–11?,” in *The Letter to the Romans: Exegesis and Application*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Francis G. H. Pang, McMaster New Testament Studies 7 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 119.

⁵⁵ In addition, Matthew 24:14 clearly indicates gospel proclamation during the

πλήρωμα as “overwhelming number” or “large harvest” (within the context of specific eras) would make sense. Thus the Gentile mission brings in an overwhelming abundance, a πλήρωμα of Gentiles (Rom 11:25, parallel to πλοῦτος ἐθνῶν in 11:12), which provokes Israel to jealousy. Then, Israel’s own πλήρωμα (11:12), or abundant harvest of conversion, initiates stage 4, an even greater mission to the Gentiles, “life from the dead,” during the Tribulation and/or millennial period (11:12, 15).

In a dispensationalist framework the pieces fit well together. If stage 2 (positive state for the Gentiles) provokes stage 3 (positive state for Israel), this suggests that stage 3 represents the end of the church age and the shifting of vocation from the church to Israel, who possessed it in the first place. Indeed, the shift from stage 2 to stages 3 and 4 stems from Israel’s jealousy over the Gentiles having taken over her vocation. Windsor aptly states,

When Israel’s failure is viewed as acting in concert with Paul’s gospel-preaching ministry, it can be seen that Israel’s failure actually brings the “wealth of the nations” (πλοῦτος ἐθνῶν, Rom 11:12; cf. 9:32). When Israelites see this, they will be driven to envy, since they will see that they themselves are missing out on the benefits of their prominent place in the fulfillment of God’s eschatological purposes. This envy will ultimately drive them to faith in Christ themselves, in order to regain their pride of place as the bearers of God’s revelation. This would be their “fulfillment” (πλήρωμα).⁵⁶

The church’s success in proclaiming the “excellencies” of God (1 Pet 2:9) is precisely what leads Israel to jealousy, just as a first-string quarterback watches jealously from the sidelines as the second-string quarterback wins the Super Bowl. Yet with Israel provoked to jealousy, salvation history shifts gears; now it is Israel’s opportunity to return to her vocation, and thus *Israel’s* πλήρωμα, her ingathering and subsequent reclamation of her calling, benefits the entire world in this final era of salvation history.

However, the reason for this shift in salvation history is not that Israel has earned it; to the contrary, it is the pure grace and covenant love of God. As Cranfield famously declared,

We shall misunderstand [Romans 9–11] if we fail to recognize that their key-word is “mercy.” . . . It is only where the Church persists in refusing to learn this message, where it secretly—perhaps quite un-

Tribulation. However, Munck suggests that Matthew 24:14 and 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 both indicate that “the conversion of the Gentiles will lead to the coming of the antichrist” (Munck, *Christ and Israel*, 134–35). Munck’s argument on these passages (interestingly, within the context of a discussion of Romans 11) deserves further study by dispensationalists.

⁵⁶ Windsor, *Paul and the Vocation of Israel*, 243.

consciously!—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God’s mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God’s mercy for unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church.⁵⁷

Thus the first-string quarterback is brought back into the game not because he earns his way back in, but rather because the coach remembers his covenant.

RAMIFICATIONS OF A FOURTH STAGE IN ROMANS 11

Further work is needed on what ramifications this fourth stage might have for dispensational theology. Three quick observations are in order, however.

First, since “[when] the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” refers to an event, probably before the parousia, that leads to Israel’s corporate salvation, which will in turn positively impact Gentiles, the “fullness of the Gentiles” may refer to the closing of the church age via a pretribulational rapture.⁵⁸ At that point, since the church has presumably fulfilled her responsibility of reaching the nations, the rapture may be God’s way of removing the church so that Israel can take center stage. Furthermore, it may be the rapture itself (a sign of God’s favor) that provokes Israel to jealousy. A pretribulational rapture is not a necessary element of this article’s thesis, but a greater focus on the rapture in relation to Israel may

⁵⁷ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 448. Similarly, Vlach states, “In the midst of disobedience and apostasy God affirms His plans to restore Israel. This is not because Israel deserves it but because God is faithful to the patriarchs with whom he made unconditional and eternal promises” (*He Will Reign Forever*, 145). See also Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003), 179. Schreiner observes, “God has designed salvation history in such a way that the extension of his saving grace surprises those who are its recipients. . . . By constructing history in such a way God makes it evident that he deserves the praise for the inclusion of his saving promises” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 612–13).

⁵⁸ I am not aware of anybody holding to this exact position. However, Saucy suggests that “the coming in of ‘the full number of the Gentiles’ [Rom 11:25] prior to the salvation of ‘all Israel’ is best understood as referring to the ingathering of Gentiles during the present age through the preaching of the gospel to all nations (cf. Mk 13:10; Mat 24:14)” (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 261). Similarly, Walvoord writes, “The terminus of Gentile blessing is the point in time when Israel’s blindness is lifted” (“Israel’s Restoration,” 415). While I agree with Walvoord that the “fullness” is linked to “Gentile blessing” in a spiritual sense (i.e., the “fullness of the Gentiles” is not related to the “time of the Gentiles” as Daniel saw it), it is not so much a “terminus of blessing” as a terminus of vocation. With the removal of the church, the primary responsibility of proclaiming God’s praises to a lost world ceases to be a Gentile job and reverts to Israel.

be a useful direction for certain forms of dispensational theology.⁵⁹

Second, one may see the practical outworking of this scheme in Revelation 7, if the 144,000 Jews of verses 1–8 directly result in the “great multitude” mentioned in verses 9–10.⁶⁰ This thought can be seen often in dispensational writings.⁶¹

Finally, whereas dispensational theology has often been accused of having a dismal, failure-oriented perspective on the state of the world, in that the church must simply “hold the line until the rapture,” a four-stage scheme of salvation history in Romans 11 necessitates a more positive outlook.⁶² The church will succeed in her outworking of the Great Commission, and Israel will, in turn, succeed when her turn comes, all due to the promises of God and his empowering Spirit.

CONCLUSION

Christians should reiterate with Cranfield: grace is the theme of Romans 9–11. Even the temporary setting aside of Israel benefits the entire world, for the primarily Gentile church then reaches the world with the gospel while Israel sits on the sidelines. However, having made a vocational covenant with Israel, the Lord will not forsake her. Incredibly, even Israel’s being provoked to jealousy

⁵⁹ In this scheme, Feinberg’s words ring true: “When God wants worldwide missionaries, he will again take up Israel. They will be a host of Jonahs back on their right jobs” (*Israel: At the Center of History and Revelation*, 188).

⁶⁰ This partially depends on one’s interpretation of μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον in Revelation 7:9. Mere literary sequence is not enough to prove that verses 1–8 lead to verse 9. Nothing in the phrase μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον requires it. However, the four other occurrences of μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον in Revelation (4:1; 7:1; 15:5; and 18:1) all probably involve a chronological or a sequential order. (Accordance command line: “μετὰ <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> οὗτος <FOLLOWED BY> <WITHIN 2 Words> ὁπάω.”) These are the only New Testament occurrences. The Septuagint has four. The sole occurrence in prophetic literature, Daniel 8:4, introduces an event that comes chronologically later than what Daniel previously saw.

⁶¹ E.g., J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 214. Rydelnik, “Israel: Why the Church Must Be Raptured,” 259; Feinberg, *Israel: At the Center of History and Revelation*, 162–63. However, this interpretation has not yet been adequately defended. Linking Romans 11 and Revelation 7 is rare within the scholarly literature, but note the following statement: “The narrative [of Revelation 7] suggests that the ‘times of the Gentiles’ (Luke 21:24) and, with that the church age, has passed. Back on Jewish ground, one is witnessing here the beginning of that which the apostle Paul anticipated in Romans 11.” Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2012), 197.

⁶² My colleague Kathy Ann Birnschein pointed this out.

ultimately benefits her, for it results in recovery of her vocation.⁶³

Thus Paul in Romans 11 highlights not three but four stages in salvation history: (1) Israel (generally speaking) rejects the Messiah; (2) the Gentiles benefit and begin to fulfill what was originally Israel's vocation; (3) provoked to jealousy, Israel through God's grace enters into her *πλήρωμα*; and (4) this ushers in a new era where the entire world is now blessed because of Israel.⁶⁴ The end result is "mercy on all" (Rom 11:32). Indeed, only the Sovereign of the universe could have devised such a scheme. "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God" (11:33).

⁶³ Farla, "Christ Replaces the Law, —but Israel Remains the People of God," 626.

⁶⁴ One should not neglect the possibility that Israel currently possesses a passive witness to God's mercy. Gerald R. McDermott suggests, "Perhaps this recent emergence of Israel as a nation-state, even with all its faults and imperfections, is a firstfruit of the renewal of *the nations*. This is the renewal that we have just been discussing—not a world of undifferentiated souls but a future world of saints from the 'peoples and nations and tribes and languages' (Rev 7:9) united in serving the Triune God." Gerald R. McDermott, *Israel Matters: Why Christians Must Think Differently about the People and the Land* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), 116.