

In a previous post (The 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration and Dispensationalism’s continued impact on theology and politics), I addressed some of the problems with what I believe to be faulty reasoning on the part of Dispensationalists (generally speaking) which sets out to maintain the perpetuity of ancient land promises embedded in a now abrogated covenant as well as the tendency to overlook types and shadows in Scripture. While this discussion dealt in part with the prophetic significance of ethnic Jews today, it did not get into the separate but related question of the scope of salvation for ethnic Jews prior to Christ’s return. As Maria Tatham pointed out in the comments, an exegesis of Romans 11:26 (“...all Israel shall be saved”) was in order.

My initial response to Maria was (in part) the following:

“Paul...uses the word ‘Israel’ to describe something besides the OT theocracy under the Mosaic Covenant [since] “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart” (Rom. 2:28-29):

“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called’” (Rom. 9:6-7).

“And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16).

These are only two examples...but in both it is clear that the context will have to determine what is meant by the word ‘Israel’, and it would make no logical or theological sense to import the restricted meaning of the nation-state of Israel into the passage. Furthermore, unless one believes that all ethnic Jews throughout history were saved by default, apart from the saving work of Christ, one cannot possibly hold that the statement, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26), means “every Jew that ever lived will be in heaven”. Usually people assert that Paul is speaking here of all Israel (every Jew? or everyone living in the modern state of Israel?) alive at the return of Christ. But what sense does it make [especially in light of the nature of the New Covenant] that God lets millions of Jews remain in darkness for all of church history and ultimately perish but all the Jews alive at His return will be saved? Not everyone agrees in detail on what Paul has specifically in mind in this passage, but it seems clear that it cannot be referring to every ethnic

Jew alive at the end of time. I think the context would dictate that it is speaking of the “Israel of God”, or New Israel, as referenced in my post (that is, all born again Jews and Gentiles gathered together as the true bride of Christ).”

It soon became clear to me (it should have been obvious) that I could provide no new insights to this key passage, nor could I improve upon the exegesis already put forth by others (I certainly did not want to come up with a novel interpretation of the text). It is for this reason that I commend to you the work of Sam Waldron. At this point, I am thoroughly convinced that Dr. Waldron—after he assesses the various common interpretations of this passage—has come down on the most biblically and theologically consistent position. Since I agree with his conclusions (at least until someone can persuade me otherwise), I will simply provide a few relevant quotes and links to additional resources. Waldron is not asserting anything new to Christian theology, nor is his position unique to reformed Baptists (he draws largely from Presbyterian theologian O. Palmer Robertson’s *The Israel of God*).

Dr. Waldron has written three very helpful books on eschatology: *The End Times Made Simple* (2007), *MacArthur’s Millennial Manifesto* (2008), and *More of the End Times Made Simple* (2009). He has also provided a very helpful discussion of Romans 11 (with a special focus on verse 26) in a sermon at the 2011 Founders Conference titled, *Romans 11: The Church and Israel*.

I do not agree with Dr. Waldron’s eschatological position at all points (I take particular issue with his departure from the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession as to the identity of antichrist, and hope to address that in the future), but on the subjects of Israel and the church I think he has given us some very persuasive arguments against the typical Dispensational/futurist interpretation. While he takes up this subject in all three of the aforementioned books, the following excerpts all come from *More of the End Times Made Simple* in which he devotes the two final chapters to an exegesis of Romans 11:26:

“Verses 1-10 compose the first part of [Romans 11]. It begins with the question: God has not rejected His people, has He? Paul’s answer to this is to speak not of God’s future plans for, but of His present dealings with the Jews. Notice the response in verse 1 to this question, I too am an Israelite! Notice also the emphasis of verse 5, In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. Paul’s solution to the problem of Jewish unbelief is not a future national conversion of Israel, but the present salvation of the elect

remnant. In the remnant the nation is saved, and God's promises are fulfilled. If Paul's argument here is proper, there seems little reason for him to append to it the idea of a future conversion of Israel in order to answer the problem of Jewish unbelief."[1]

Waldron goes on to show that the emphasis in the next two sections of the chapter (vv. 11-16 and 17-24) is the present state of his "fellow countrymen" (v.13) as it was in Paul's day. "The grafting in of the unbelieving Jew takes place whenever he ceases to continue in his unbelief."[2]

"...Paul's reference to the present dealings of God with Israel permeate Romans 11. They are present in every part of the chapter. Interpreters have often neglected this fact. This neglect raises the question as to whether the same interpreters have misunderstood the supposed references to a future national conversion of Israel."[3]

"[Romans 11:1] has often been understood to imply a future restoration of the nation of Israel.... [But] Paul's [point] is not that God has [a] glorious future in store for the nation of Israel, but that God has an elect remnant right now in the nation of Israel. There is no hint of a future, national conversion of Israel in Romans 11:1. Neither, then, is there any necessity for a future conversion of Israel to resolve the problem of Israel's unbelief. The present salvation of the remnant as epitomized in Paul himself is a satisfactory resolution of this problem."[4]

"Notice first of all what Paul does not say. He does not say, 'And then all Israel will be saved.' This is the way people often read the text, but the NASB properly translates the Greek word, thus. Paul does not say, 'and then,' but 'and thus.'"[5]

Waldron goes on to quote O. Palmer Robertson who affirms the accuracy of this translation. Robertson writes:

"...The phrase kai houtos...simply does not mean 'and then'. Of the approximately 205 times in which the term houtos occurs in the NT, not once does it have a temporal significance."[6]

In other words, Paul’s reference to a “hardening” (NASB) or “blinding” (NKJV) in verse 7 has not to do with temporality but with partiality. The remnant of Jewish believers according to election would be saved, the rest would be hardened. “And thus all Israel will be saved” is a reference to the remnant and implies nothing about a temporary hardening (to be eventually removed, turning the non-elect into elect). Waldron goes on:

“Thus, when Paul say, ‘And thus all Israel will be saved,’ his eye is not looking toward the end of the age. Rather, it is sweeping the entire gospel age. He sees an elect remnant of Israel saved in every generation.”[7]

“We must remember that God has not cast off His ancient people, Israel. He is fulfilling His promises to them in the elect remnant of Israelites which includes Paul himself. It is by the bringing of the Gentiles into the one, ancient olive tree of Israel that they will be saved. Thus, identifying all Israel as all the elect of God from both Jews and Gentiles is not accomplished by a spiritualizing hermeneutic, but by a redemptive-historical process which safeguards the literal fulfillment of God’s promises to ethnic Israel. Paul has prepared us for the expansion of Israel in this context to include Gentiles in the ‘all Israel’ who will be saved by his use of this very phrase in Romans 9:6. There ‘all Israel’ also includes elect Gentiles.”[8]

Waldron has much more to say but I will not attempt to reprint chapters in their entirety (nor would it be lawful to do so). I recommend all three books. If nothing else, listen to Romans 11: The Church and Israel for a fine treatment of this passage.

[1] Waldron, S.E., *More of the End Times Made Simple*, Calvary Press Publishing, 2009, p. 205.

[2] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 206.

[3] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 207.

[4] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 209—10.

[5] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 214.

[6] Robertson, O.P., *The Israel of God*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2000, p. 181, as cited in Waldron, ref. 1, pp. 214—15.

[7] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 215.

[8] Waldron, ref. 1, p. 220.

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