

The question, “Did God reject his people?” is the most important question that could be asked about the Jews. It is really the question at the centre of the current debate as to whether or not the Jewish nation still has any prophetic place in the unfolding purposes of God for his world. If God has in fact rejected and finished with his own people the Jews, then of course there can be no further purposeful objective in their history - they can only be viewed like any other nation and can no longer be described in any unique way as “his people”. A restoration cannot be in prospect. On the other hand, if he hasn’t rejected them we may well ask what purpose now remains in their future history? A future restoration?

Though a current question, it is not a new question. It was a question that was abroad in the very earliest days of the Christian church, and important enough for Paul to address at some length. He did so in the main for two reasons. First he was, like his fellow Jewish Christians, deeply concerned about the wholesale rejection of their Messiah by the nation, and how that could be reconciled with all the promises of blessing that had rested on the nation from the time of Abraham onward, and particularly the blessing promised in the coming of the Messiah. This was a problem he had resolved to his own satisfaction and he wanted to comfort the Jewish Christians by showing them that God had not been unfaithful to Israel and still had purposes for her. Second, he wanted to make plain to Gentile converts that they had no reason at all to be arrogant towards the Jews (as they undoubtedly were - Rom 11:18). They were not to look down on the Jews for their current rejection of the God of their fathers nor were they to think themselves superior to them because of the grace they were receiving from God. Thus comfort for the Jews in their distress, and a warning to the Gentile Christians about their pride was his double aim, an aim very appropriate for our own generation.

Paul posed the question in his letter to the Romans, and treated it comprehensively in chapter 11, the previous two chapters having also been devoted to the issue of the Jews. In point of fact he raised the question twice in chapter 11, and on the second occasion rephrased it and sharpened the issues at stake. So the question “*Did God reject his people?*” (v.1), was followed by “*Did they stumble as to fall beyond recovery?*” (v.11). His answer to both questions was a resounding “No!”, and his reasons are absolutely critical.

**“Did God reject his people? By no means!” (11:1ff)**

By the time Paul wrote Romans (25 years or more after the death of Jesus) it was evident that the Jewish nation and its leadership were showing no sign of repentance for having rejected and killed Jesus. Rather they were continuing consistently and bitterly to oppose the preaching of Jesus as Messiah and Saviour. As Paul described it they were caught up in their zeal to effect their own righteousness by pursuing the Pharisaical expositions of the law, and rejecting the righteousness that comes by faith (Rom 9:30). They were “*an obstinate and disobedient people*” (10:21). So Paul asks the question whether this rejection of the gospel by the Jews was a sign that God had in fact finished with his people, having hardened them and rejected them. If God was really with his people and showing them the grace he had promised to the nation then surely, it might be argued, he would have caused them to accept the gospel and their Messiah. He must have rejected them! Paul’s answer is a very emphatic “No!” What God has done, said Paul, is what he had done before with his people, namely showed grace to a remnant and “*hardened*” the rest. After all, Paul himself was a Jew and he had been shown grace and mercy, like many others. The believing Jews, saved by grace, formed a remnant and their existence proved that God had not forgotten his people. God’s faithfulness to Israel was to be seen in the choosing out of that remnant and the bestowing of grace upon them. The great majority was indeed rejected but it was not a total rejection. Paul is at pains to demonstrate that it was in the “remnant” that God had always shown his faithfulness to Israel. There had always been choice and hardening throughout Israel’s history, and he particularly illustrates this by reference to Elijah who along with just seven thousand were seen as the righteous remnant in his day (Rom. 11:2-5). He makes the same point in Romans 9: 6ff but with different illustrations. Israel’s history had always been one of hardening the majority and saving a remnant. (Rom (9:27)). The fact was that the current situation was no different from what it has always been.

**“Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!” (11:11)**

The second formulation of the question digs a little deeper than the first and takes the discussion further. Did this stumbling over the “Rock of Christ”, this rejection of his righteousness mean that they (the Jews, the Jewish nation that did the rejecting) were now beyond any restoration? The focus of the question is now, therefore, on the Jews who had rejected the Messiah - it was on those who had “*stumbled*”. This means that it was a focus on the disbelieving “nation”. Paul was posing the question, “Was this stumbling (this rejection of the Messiah) such that there could be no recovery from it? Was it the end of the road for the Jews as such? Had the nation gone too far? Was the remnant the only piece to be salvaged? Again the answer is a very emphatic “No!”

**“The Jewish nation would eventually come to a full acceptance of the Christ”**

God, Paul says, was working to a clearly defined plan, a plan in which there was still a place for the nation. The first part of the plan was that the rejection of the Messiah by the Jews should become the means whereby the preaching of the gospel to the gentiles would be brought about, for God’s purposes had always involved the inclusion of the gentiles in his salvation. The second part of the plan was that, after a full gathering of gentiles into the kingdom, a day would come when the Jewish nation would eventually come to a full acceptance of the Christ, a day when God would release great blessing; “*For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead!*” (11:15) The expression “*their acceptance*” stands in direct contrast to “*their rejection*”. Since “*their rejection*” is descriptive of those who had “*stumbled*” (the Jewish nation), “*their acceptance*” must also be descriptive of the nation and point to a time when God would have dealings with Israel as a nation and receive it back.

This answer, of course, betrays an underlying presumption in Paul's thinking, namely that there will in fact be a time when the nation, as a nation, will be gathered in - a restoration. Paul goes on to clarify and justify this presumption by indicating that it is based on nothing less than a revelation he has had from God.

### **Paul's Revelation; "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery" (11:25)**

Paul discloses this revelation in Rom. 11:28: *"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery ..... Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved."* A "mystery" in scripture refers to a hidden purpose of God, but Paul is referring here to a mystery that has now been revealed. Paul is saying in effect that he now knows what God's hidden purpose is for the Jews and that he has the mind of God on the issue. In the purposes of God a blindness or hardness has indeed come over Israel (that is to say the nation) in rejecting the Messiah but that blindness is only partial (some have turned to the Lord and received salvation in Jesus), and furthermore, it will come to an end. This ending is indicated by the phrase *"a hardening in part until ....."*. Furthermore Paul goes on to define the end point as a time when *"the fullness of the Gentiles is come in."* When that has happened *"all Israel will be saved"*. These, clearly, are words of supreme importance, not only for what they say, but also for the authority that they carry as explicit divine revelation.

**"... and so all Israel will be saved"**

What is meant by *"all Israel will be saved"*? This is a crucial question. It is quite clear that the word *"Israel"* here relates to the Jews as distinct from the gentiles, and to make it apply in a spiritual way to the whole "church", Jew and Gentile, hopelessly damages the contrast between Jew and Gentile which runs throughout the whole chapter. It is quite out of order to make "Israel" here apply to the whole church when throughout Paul's argument it has been specifically used to define Israel as a nation. In using the expression *"all Israel will be saved"* Paul is still addressing the issue of whether Israel as a nation has stumbled beyond recovery, and he is making the point that the day will come when not just a remnant but the nation in its entirety will be saved, a day when the blindness will have gone and light will dawn. *"All Israel"* also patently stands in contrast to the idea of a remnant and in context can only mean the whole nation.

What is meant by *"the full number of the gentiles is come in"*? In context it can only refer to the conversion of gentiles, and to a full or complete number of such conversions (according to God's measure). The precise definition of what is "a full number" is impossible to give (the Greek word "pleroma" is too indistinct) - only the event will define it. Perhaps the nearest definition we can get is in the prophetic words of John in Revelation when he speaks of *"a great multitude, that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language"* (Rev:7:9). Time was needed for such a great multitude to be gathered, and for Paul the continued hardening of Israel in some way was making all this possible. When God had dealt with the Gentiles to his full satisfaction then the hardening would cease and Israel would turn to him.

### **An Appeal to Old Testament Prophets (11:26-27)**

Paul strengthens his argument by affirming that the notion of *"all Israel will be saved"* is in line with the prophetic Scriptures, and we may reasonably presume that "the revelation" or the disclosure of the "mystery" about the Jews has something to do with a new and fuller understanding given to Paul about what the prophets were saying. Tantalisingly he only gives us the briefest summary allusions to such scriptures, in a combination of just three or four Old Testament phrases (from Isaiah 49:20-21 & 27:9, Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Psalm 14:7). These evidently are intended, however, to summarise the general position of the prophets, which he states as: *"The deliverer will come from Zion (Is.49:20 & Psalm 14:7); he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins. (Jer 31)"* The apostle's meaning is plain; a person bringing deliverance will bring it from Jerusalem, and the deliverance will be both the forgiveness of sin and the turning of Jacob (the nation) from ungodliness. This is a new covenant God has made with his people and he will fulfill it.

Luther, in his Lectures on Romans written in his earlier and pro-Jewish days, has an interesting comment on the general tenor of scripture in relation to this "mystery" passage of Paul. Though he finds the meaning of the "mystery" as it stands "obscure", he is persuaded that it must mean an end time national deliverance by the sheer weight of prophetic scripture pointing in that direction. He quotes Deut. 4:30-31 where Moses, having prophesied that Israel must be led through all nations, says, *"In the latter days you will return to the Lord your God and obey his voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God"*. He also quotes Hos 3:4-5 *For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar ... Afterward they shall return and seek the Lord their God ...and they shall come in fear to the Lord ... in the latter days"*. He also notes that such an interpretation fits with Jesus words, *"Jerusalem will be trodden down until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled"* (Lk 21:24).

### **An "Irrevocable" Covenant - "God's gift and his call are irrevocable" (11:28-29)**

The final coping stone in Paul's argument for Israel's final recovery or restoration is found in his insistence on the permanency of God's covenant with Israel: *"As far as the gospel is concerned they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."* (Rom 11:28-29). Though Paul acknowledges that *"as far as the gospel is concerned they are enemies on your account"* and is fully aware of their bitter enmity and antagonism to the preaching of the gospel, he insists that there was another opposite truth to be acknowledged, namely that despite their enmity they are none the less "loved" by God. They are loved because God has chosen them out as a people (i.e. *"as far as election is concerned"*) They are loved on account of the believing "Patriarchs", Abraham and his immediate successors to whom God made his covenant that their descendants should be his people and forever. God's gifts and call, enshrined in the covenant, are "irrevocable" (without repentance or turning back). *"Having chosen the Jews as his people, the purpose which he had in view in that choice can never be altered; and as it was his purpose that they should ever remain his people, their future restoration to his favour and kingdom is certain"* Hodge: Romans.

God, then, it seems has not finished with Israel. She is not finally rejected. There remains a prophetic purpose for that nation as a whole, as well as the continued grace in the gathering of a remnant from the nation whilst it remains hardened and blinded. However difficult it may be prognosticate on how that purpose will ultimately unfold, the fact that it will do so throws great light on the tortuous history of a nation that refuses to go away. This means we would be wise to watch the progress of that history.

**Bob Dunnett**