

## **Israel's Remnant: An Evaluation of Dispensational Hermeneutics**

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### **Introductory Overview**

Often when we read the Bible, the subject of the *remnant* often takes us back to the story of Elijah when he felt frustrated (I Kings 19:10, 14 & 18; Pink, 2020). For a season, the prophet felt distraught and almost gave up thinking that he was alone. He felt hedged in and was about to be snuffed out and thus sits down to vent out his frustration to the lord. Hard and lonely had been his valiant fight but it appeared to him that God had failed him and his efforts useless. It was at such a time that God revealed to him that He had reserved 7,000 people who had not bowed the knee to baal (v18). This revelation brought much relief and comfort to Elijah, just to know that God had kept His word. Israel, as a nation has had a history of faithfulness to God, in which time, God has blessed them mightily but it equally has had serious times of backsliding in which time God has afflicted, banished or disbanded the nation. Their lot has often fallen on harsh times.

Similarly, when the lord Jesus Christ came to the Earth as the promised Messiah, for some reason, the Jewish nation did not accept or recognize him (John 1:11,29-30). In fact, his own rejected him and in their blinded fury, eventually had him crucified (John 19:15-19; Luke 23:34). His worst opponents were in fact the Jews and to this day, *Yehushua* remains largely rejected by his kinsfolk, the Jews. But this rejection is not uniquely among these people but right across humanity. In every age, the name 'Jesus Christ' is rejected by every Jew that is still awaiting a Savior, political and mighty in nature. The Apostle John in a sense, lamented at this rejection, as he points out in John 1 and much later seeks to prove that this Jesus was indeed the Savior who walked upon the face of the earth (John 1:14,15; I John 1:1-4). It's amazing that the Gentiles, the most unlikely believers, accepted him as the long awaited saviour. But have all Israelites rejected him as the Savior? Will they all be lost as a result? What has become of the Lord's promise to Abraham and other prophets and patriarchs that He would never forsake the nation of Israel, having loved them from among many nations? This and many questions, no doubt, bugged the Apostles and those that had read the word of God. Surely, God could not have forsaken the nation of Israel for ever.

## Insights Gleaned from the epistle to the Romans

This important issue was addressed by the Apostle Paul in the book of Romans. In that important treatise, the Apostle takes on a systematic approach with a view to explain the Gospel right from the first Chapter, proving that ALL human beings are sinners. In the second Chapter Paul establishes the fact that even the Jew, whose heritage is rich with spiritual privileges, is equally a sinner. Having established that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, Paul now shows the remedy from Chapter 3:21: onwards. The glorious subject of Justification is expounded with resounding clarity and its fruits as well (Chapters 3-7). In Chapter 8, the Apostle declares that there is no condemnation for those that are in Christ but as he approaches Chapter nine, we begin to see something of the difficult question coming up relating to the Jewish nation in relation to their unbelief. Evidently, this is a touchy and painful question as to why his fellow countrymen rejected the Saviour. To answer this critical question as well as prove that God's word has not or will never fail regarding Israel, the Apostle explains it from a number of perspectives. Firstly, he states that God has a remnant among the Jews, who believe much like he had in the days of Elijah. In as much as the majority of them may reject and have nothing to do with the Savior, there is none the less a remnant who remain faithful to God. These have read the scriptures, accepted Jesus' claims as the Savior and owned him as their King. This means that God has a group of people that truly believe in Him at all times regardless of the age. Just as there were some in Elijah's days, there were some in Jesus day, Paul's day and even today. As long as the Lord tarries in coming, the remnant will be there, irrespective of their number or locality on the earth. The second point that he brings out in the Chapters 9-11 is the aspect of election of some Jews to salvation, although some argue that it is the entire Israelite nation in contra-distinction to other heathen nations, not individuals. That said, God has determined and pleased to elect some to salvation who will respond to the gospel call and accept the Savior. Paul proves this point by alluding to Jacob and Esau where God states that He loves one over the other even before the twins are born or have done anything good or bad. These chosen Jews will respond to the gospel in the period when the majority reject the Savior. The next front that Paul uses is the hardening of the Israelite, akin to what happened to Pharaoh. At the time Moses approached him to let the Children of Israel go, the man was adamant and would not allow them to go after many miraculous activities and afflictions, he finally gives in and allows them to leave Egypt. Paul picks that scenario and applies it to the Children of Israel's present and future unbelief. In as much as God knew that the Israelites would eventually be set free, he first hardens Pharaoh's heart, and that for a purpose, to make His power known. Although Pharaoh himself was acting volitionally and under no duress, he is none the less fulfilling the will of God. Applied to the Israelites in Pauls' day, this appears to have been the case. Again, this demonstrates that God's word has not failed at all, neither had He abandoned His promise to the nation of Israel. However, Covenant Theologians, holding a (i.e. expanding knowledge with more revelation till canon was closed) canonical

interpretation of scripture, the nation of Israel was but a pointer to the spiritual Israel expressed in the Church (Vlach 2021). Quite alright, in this context, the bible refers to physical Israel with a special focus to the elect among the Israelite nation (i.e. the remnant) who would be saved with the co-opted Commonwealth of Israel alluded to in Ephesians 2:11-22 & Romans 9:24 & 25. Thus, according to Reformed hermeneutics, not dispensational New Covenant theology, in the now clearer new and complete revelation found in the New Testament, the "All Israel" found in Romans 10 & 11, refers to the Commonwealth composed of God's elect across history, not necessarily the physical Israelite nation but including the remnant elect from among the Jews (Romans 9:27; 11:1,6,25-26). This is what probably comforts the inspired Apostle, although he would have loved the entire Jewish nation saved. This is the pulse of Paul. Obviously, we get a mighty push back from NCT like Mike Vlach (2021) whose hermeneutical approach, in sync with Walter Kaiser, will not for a moment budge an inch! Is there a discontinuity or not here? In an attempt to unlock this tough knot, we should perhaps ask, what does the whole of scripture say or point to? This is not about probability or statistical frequency but what the full revelation states. While heeding the counsel of Carson (2007), Klein, Bloomberg & Hubbard (2017), and Downing (2020), we strongly assert that Vlach's 2021 book is very helpful volume on this matter, especially the deeply insightful first part, where Dr Vlach both highlights and objectively critiques 7 views on OT-NT author scriptural citation or/and quotations. Although Vlach does not critique his preferred view, and understandably so, we think his work is sure worth reading and reviewing. We probably do that at a future date.

Back to our original discourse: According to the Dispensational hermeneutic, the arguments presented in Romans Chapter nine lead us to Chapter ten where Paul expresses his deepest longing to have his countrymen accept the saviour citing the amazing privileges they have been blessed with over the centuries (Romans 10:1). He, in the ninth Chapter, mentions the law, the prophets and a host of other advantages that they have had over the Gentiles and mourns for this (Romans 9:4,5). In the midst of this lament, he mentions that the hardening is only for a season and has opened the door for the Gentile to enter into the divine covenant, in the hope that this would arouse the jealousy and interest of the Jew. According to Dispensational reading, Paul states in Chapter ten and part of eleven that the Jews would be hardened until the tribulation when the nation would be cleansed and finally remain of the pure believing Jews who would then be saved as an entire nation during the millennium. Thus, the dispensationalist holds that ALL Israel will truly be saved composed of only Jews not as other people have explained away the passage that Paul may be talking about the spiritual Israel being saved. According to this hermeneutical approach, Israel replacement theology has no place in scripture, if we are to literally exegete or even interpret the Bible (Vlach 2021). The dispensationalist further contends that the passage must be interpreted literally and thus believe the God who promised in the covenant to restore Israel to a nation.

These are fine arguments indeed especially viewed in the light of Revelation 20 and other passages which talk about a 1,000 year millennium rule of Christ. But there are other equally formidable views held by other sound theologians such as Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Francis Schaeffer, BB Warfield, and William Hendriksen among other theological Giants of the past. Charles Hodge, Jonathan Edwards, saintly Robert Murray McCheyne and perhaps the towering JC Ryle held the Premillennial view of eschatology and probably the same on the '*All Israel shall be saved*' question.

Be that as it may, the *all Israel* question must be answered one way or the other. Pundits would argue, can anyone explain it better than the way dispensationalists have done? The question remains unresolved, though clear to the Reformed mind.

## **Conclusion**

The question surrounding the Remnant in Romans 9-11 has and continues to be contentious given it's implications. If it means the elect (individuals) from among the nation of Israel, then replacement theology carries the day. On the other hand, if it refers to the entire physical nation of Israel, then dispensational theology is right. Discontinuities or continuities in relation to Israel need to be settled. In our view, and in the light of different parts of scripture, we hold that spiritual Israel, composed of elect Jews and Gentiles holds true. The Church represents this Commonwealth of Israel according to Ephesians, Galatians and Ephesians.

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