

Eschatological Problems VIII: Israel's Blindness

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Almost every aspect of the predicted future for Israel constitutes a decisive factor in the structure of prophetic interpretation. The construction that is placed upon passages in Scripture dealing with the future of Israel inevitably determines the whole scope of eschatology. One of the obvious facts which all systems must face is that Israel is just as surely in the New Testament as in the Old, and the phenomena of the preservation of Israel as a distinct people through centuries of dispersion have called for some adequate explanation.

Among those who take Scripture seriously, two attitudes have emerged. Some have denied any future to Israel, attempting to find all of Israel's future included in the Christian church, i.e., whatever future is assigned to them is identical with that of Gentile believers. Others have held that there is a future day of blessing for Israel as a distinct people. The former view is held by those who follow an amillennial interpretation of prophecy, while the latter view is held by the postmillennial and premillennial systems of interpretation. With the current disrepute of postmillennialism, it has remained for the premillennial and amillennial systems to uphold their respective interpretations. The issue is rather clearly drawn, though too often the premises assumed settle the argument before it begins. It is the thesis of this discussion that the amillennial viewpoint involves a distortion of numerous passages of Scripture and an oversimplification of eschatology which is not warranted by the prophetic Word. The issue of Israel's future should be settled by investigation into the plain statements of Scripture regarding it. To this end, the present article deals with a crucial and important doctrine in the eschatology of Israel, viz., the subject of Israel's spiritual blindness. It is predicted in Scripture that the present blindness of Israel will in the future be removed and that certain important results will follow. The nature and importance of this doctrine will be evident in its effect on the structure of eschatology.

Four Interpretations

The key passage to the doctrine of Israel's blindness or "hardening" is found in Romans 11:25—"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits—, that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." The passage seems to reveal that a blindness or hardening has befallen Israel at the present time, that this blindness will terminate at the time designated as the "fulness of the Gentiles." The verse following which constitutes a part of the same sentence goes on, "And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn ungodliness from Jacob." In other words, there seems to be a definite time sequence: first, Israel is blind, then Israel's blindness is ended and "all Israel shall be saved." The passage calls for specific events which involve the whole scheme of prophecy. Does Israel have a future? Is there a day coming of spiritual blessing for Israel? When will "all Israel" be saved?

In an attempt to answer these leading questions, at least four interpretations of the passage have arisen. Origen, the father of the allegorical method of interpretation, seems to be the originator of the idea that the passage teaches only the general truth that there will be opposition and blindness in relation to the Gospel which will be gradually overcome, resulting in the end in "all Israel," meaning according to him, all believers, being saved. This interpretation, of course, robs the passage of any specific meaning and does violence to its terms.

The attitude of the Reformers was only a slight improvement on Origen. Encouraged perhaps by the prominence given this verse by the ardent millenarians of that day, they denied that the passage taught any general future conversion of Israel, affirming that it merely taught that the hardened and blind condition of Israel did not prevent some from entering the church. The prejudice against allowing any foothold for the millenarians is illustrated in Calvin's deliberate mistranslation of the "until" into "that," and by Luther's famous statement to the effect that the Jews are the devil's children and impossible to convert (*zu bekehren ist unmöglich*).¹ Calvin, like Origen, makes "all Israel equivalent to the "whole people of God," i.e., the church.² The effect of both views is to deny Israel any literal fulfillment of their prophetic future and to consider them cut off forever as a people.

The third type of interpretation is typical of nineteenth century postmillennialism and Charles Hodge may be taken as an example. Holding, as does any consistent postmillennial system, that there is going to be a fulfillment of the prophecies relative to an earthly kingdom of peace and righteousness on the earth, they find the fulfillment of the many promises, related to Israel in this period. Charles Hodge, accordingly, interpreted Romans 11:25 as predicting "a great and general conversion of the Jewish people, which should take place when the fulness of the Gentiles had been brought in, and that then, and not till then, those prophecies should be fully accomplished which speak of the salvation of Israel."³ He goes on to write that this view has been the position of every age of the church except the period of the Reformers. He lists eight formal arguments in support of this interpretation.

The fourth interpretation is typical of twentieth century premillennialism. It holds with the postmillennial viewpoint that Israel has a future, but it insists, that this future is more than a mere spiritual revival. The future of Israel, is a restoration of Israel as a nation as well as a people, and it involves the fulfillment of a literal kingdom on earth with Christ as King. The present age is one of Gentile blessing; the future age will be one of Israel's blessing. The two periods are just as distinct as that of Israel before Pentecost and the present age. It is a new dispensation in which the place of Gentiles and Israel in privilege and blessing is reversed, Now is the time of the fulness of Gentile blessing and privilege. The future day will place Israel first.

¹ 1. The full quotation is as follows: "Ein jüdisch Herz ist so stock-stein-eisenteufelhart, das mit keiner Weise zu bewegen ist;—es sind junge Teufel zur Hölle verdammt, diese Teufelskinder zu bekehren ist unmöglich, wie etliche solchen Wahn schöpfen aus der Epistel an die Römer." Charles Hodge quotes Olshausen as using this passage to illustrate the Reformer's attitude toward the Jews. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Epistle to the Romans* (1909), pp. 584-85.

² 2. "Multi accipiunt de populo Judaico, acsi Paulus diceret instaurandum adhuc in eio religionem ut prius; sed ego Israelis nomen ad totum Dei populum extendo, hoc sensu: Quum Gentes ingressae fuerint, simul et Judaei ex defectione se ad fidei obedientiam recipient: atque ita complebitur salus totius Israelis Dei, quem ex utrisque colligi oportet: sic tamen ut priorem locum Judaei obtineant, ceu in familia Dei primogeniti." Cf. Calvin's *Commentary on Romans, in loc.* Quoted by William Kelly, *Notes on Epistle to the Romans* (1873), pp. 231-32.

³ 3. *Epistle to the Romans*, p. 584.

The problem of interpretation raised in this discussion is solved by proper exegesis of Romans 11:25 in its context. It may be observed before turning to this, however, that the viewpoint of Origen or of Luther is no solution to the problem at all. The allegorical system of interpretation of which Origen is the father is theological quicksand for this doctrine as for all others. If the Scriptures are to be subject to a fanciful interpretation according to the whims of the interpreter, it is obvious that no solution to any problem can be found for the simple reason that the very existence of the problem is denied. Problems arise from an attempt to arrive at the plain and literal meaning of the Scriptures. The viewpoint of the Reformers in regard to Israel is also unsatisfactory and provides no solution to the problem of interpretation. Their attitude was obviously prejudiced and their interpretation is governed by opinion rather than exegesis. In the heat of the controversies of the Reformation, the millennial issue was cast aside rather than weighed, and the future of Israel in Scripture suffered the same fate. The doctrinal problem of Israel's future must be solved by an appeal to the written Word and an attempt to find its revelation on this important theme.

What Has Befallen Israel?

It is the plain teaching of Romans 11:25 that something has happened to Israel. What occurred is described as a "blindness" (King James Version) or "hardening" (Revised Version). The Greek word *πώρωσις* refers to "*the covering with a callus*" (Thayer). In the other two instances in which it occurs in the New Testament (Mark 3:5; Eph 4:18) it is used with *τῆς καρδίας* and refers to "hardening of the heart." The absence of the qualifying clause in Romans 11:25 left the translators in a dilemma and occasioned the various translations "blindness" or dulling of the sight, and "hardening" or dulling of the senses more generally. According to A. T. Robertson, the word is used by Hippocrates as a medical term, and means in the New Testament, "obtuseness of intellectual discernment, mental dulness."⁴ From the word itself, then, it is clear that the affliction befalling Israel has to do with their reception of God's message and revelation. In respect to this, they are blind or hardened. What is the nature of this blindness?

It is the position of most commentators who deal with this problem that the blindness of Israel had a long history before Christ. It is not difficult to trace the lack of understanding on the part of Israel of God's revelation and purposes throughout the entire Old Testament period. Certainly in the time of Moses, during the Judges, and the periods of the early and latter prophets, Israel manifested a dullness of spiritual understanding of which Isaiah complained. Paul refers to this frequently by reference to Moses, David, and Isaiah in Romans ten and eleven. It is also clear that the whole human race without distinction between Israel and Gentiles are spiritually blind by virtue of their depravity and cannot see apart from a work of God in enabling grace. In what sense has something befallen Israel which is unusual and distinct?

The key to the problem is afforded by the use of the word *mystery*. The doctrine of Romans 11:25 is referred to as a "mystery." By this word reference is made to a doctrine which had not been revealed prior to the New Testament revelation but which is now fully made known—as Robertson puts it, "the revealed will of God now made known to all."⁵ In whatever sense, then,

⁴ 4. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, IV, 398.

⁵ 5. *Ibid.*, IV, 397.

Israel was blind before Christ, a new judgment of God has fallen upon them after rejecting Christ. Whereas the former blindness had to do with the *prophetic* revelation, the latter blindness had to do with the *fulfillment* in Christ. Israel, which of all nations should have recognized the credentials of Christ, leads the Gentiles in being slow of hearing and understanding. By designating Israel's blindness as a mystery, a new aspect is therefore added.

It is also included in the revelation that this blindness is "in part." The expression ἀπὸ μέρους translated "in part" quite clearly refers to the fact that the blindness is not universal. The veil is lifted for some at least, and individual Jews like Paul have believed in Christ. The thought is not that all Israel is partially blinded. While the majority of Israel are unusually and distinctively blinded, a few are granted as exceptions and this occasions the "in part." Whether or not Martin Luther can be persuaded that he was wrong in denying that Romans teaches Jews can be converted, it is rather obvious that this is the teaching of the passage. The situation of blindness in part is the abiding condition of Israel in this age.

What Is the Meaning of Until?

The central teaching of the passage revolves on the preposition *until* (ἄχρι οὗ). The condition of Israel's blindness is revealed to continue up to a certain point at which it is terminated. That this expression is crucial to the interpretation is borne out by the attempts to alter its force. Calvin, for instance, changes it to "that," making the blindness of Israel a factor in bringing about the fullness of the Gentiles. This is a clear violation of the meaning of the expression. As Charles Hodge states, "The words...cannot, so consistently with usage, be translated, *as long as*, or *so that*, followed as they are here by the aorist subjunctive; see Rev. xv.8 , xvii.17 ; compare Heb. iii.13 ."⁶ A. T. Robertson follows the same translation, labeling the clause a "temporal clause" meaning "until which time."⁷ Its basic meaning is "up to."⁸ In the language of Thayer it indicates "the terminus ad quem." If we are willing to accept the plain meaning of the Greek text, we must recognize that this passage teaches two distinct situations: one, in which Israel is blinded in part; two, in which this blindness is removed. This is what the passage states and any tampering with it is confession of prejudice.

When Will Israel's Blindness Be Ended?

The exegesis of Romans 11:25 has indicated a predicted time when Israel's blindness will be ended. This time is described as the point in the prophetic program when "the fulness of the Gentiles be come in." This expression which occurs only here in the New Testament has given rise to many interpretations. Dr. Charles Feinberg summarizes the various viewpoints as follows: "Sanday and Headlam maintain that τὸ πλήρωμα refers to the Gentile world as a whole. Griffith Thomas refers the time to the close of the Gentile dispensation. Faber, Stifler, Brookes, and Chalmers are all of the opinion that the time referred to is identical with 'the times of the Gentiles.' Godet, after denoting the fulness of the Gentiles as the totality of the Gentile nations, designates the time as 'the times of the Gentiles.' Bosworth contends that reference is made to

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 586-87.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, IV, 398.

⁸ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, Fifth Edition, p. 639.

the large majority of the Gentile population of the world, while Govett thinks the phrase refers to the elect of this dispensation out of all nations. Moule holds that *εἰσεέλθῃ* ('be come in') refers to a time when the ingathering of the Gentile children of God will be

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not at an end, but running high.”⁹ There is obviously much difference of opinion on the subject.

It is not necessary to the argument that Romans 11:25 predicts a future time of blessing for Israel to settle with finality the meaning of the expression “fulness of the Gentiles.” It clarifies the situation, however, to arrive at some understanding of the meaning of the term. While the Scriptures do not explicitly expound the term, it is evidently the antithesis of the “fulness” of Israel mentioned in Romans 11:12, “Now if the fall of them [Israel] be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their [Israel’s] fulness?” The present age is the time of the fall of Israel and the riches of the Gentiles. The passage clearly implies that in a future period the fulness of Israel will come and that in it the Gentiles will have even more blessing than at present. The meaning of the passage is, then, simply that the Gentiles will have their full time of blessing and that this will be followed by Israel’s time of blessing. The “until” of Romans 11:25 would mark the close of the Gentile period as such.

Within the bounds of the premillennial interpretation of Scripture, a problem remains regarding the termination of the period of Gentile blessing. In Luke 21:24, Christ referred to the “times of the Gentiles” as continuing as long as Jerusalem is “trodden down of the Gentiles.” The reference in Luke is to the political domination of Jerusalem by Gentiles which began with the fall of Jerusalem at the time of the captivity and has continued to the present day. While the terminology is not significant in itself, from the context of the two passages involved, it seems clear that the expression “times of the Gentiles” has reference to political domination of Gentiles, while the expression “fulness of the Gentiles” has reference to Gentile blessing and opportunity in this present age. If this analysis is correct, the times of the Gentiles and the fulness of the Gentiles are two entirely different ideas. The times of the Gentiles began long before Christ and will continue until Christ returns to establish His kingdom. The fulness of the Gentiles began at Pentecost and will continue only as long as the present age of grace. From the standpoint of eschatology, the important point is that the fulness of the Gentiles will come to its close before the times of the Gentiles are run out. Accepting the usual interpretation that the church, the body of Christ, will be caught up with Christ to glory before the time of tribulation predicted for Daniel’s seventieth week, it seems clear that the fulness of the Gentiles will come abruptly to its close when the church is caught up to heaven. If so, we have here the terminus of the fulness of the Gentiles and the terminus of Israel’s blindness.

Two Aspects of Israel’s Restoration

A problem frequently overlooked by premillennial writers who accept the solution of Romans 11:25 given above is that the Scriptures do not confirm any immediate change in “all Israel” after the rapture. During the tribulation period it is only a remnant which turn to Christ. It seems clear that the majority of Jews as well as Gentiles worship the beasts of Revelation 13

⁹9. *The Mystery of Israel’s Blindness*, unpublished thesis filed in the Dallas Theological Seminary Library, pp. 69-70. Those desiring a fuller discussion of the subject than is possible here will find this thesis an invaluable contribution. For a history of the subject, see the article by Dr. Herbert E. Kann, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, October-December, 1937, pp. 442-457.

instead of Christ, and that the Jews reestablish their ancient worship in Jerusalem in unbelief rather than in acceptance of their Messiah. How then is Israel's blindness lifted?

The answer seems to be that the restoration of Israel is in two major steps. At the rapture of the church, Gentiles again take second place in God's program and the Jew resumes his place. It is a time of Gentile domination but not of Gentile blessing. The unfulfilled program of the seventieth week of Daniel is completed during the final period before the second coming of Christ. During this period among unbelieving Jews, the Mosaic laws and sacrifices are reinstated. As far as Israel as a whole is concerned, there is no evidence of a large turning to Christ. During this period, however, a remnant turn to Christ. Apparently the very act of the rapture of the church serves to confirm to those who are honestly seeking their Messiah, howbeit in blindness, that Jesus of Nazareth is the true Messiah and the only Savior. Overnight after the church is caught up, many of Israel have their eyes opened to the truth and immediately become the evangelists of the period. The special blindness which was Israel's judgment during the time of Gentile blessing is removed, and the Jew resumes his place.

The language of Romans 11:25 in this connection must be carefully noted. While it is revealed that the special blindness peculiar to Israel is lifted, the passage does not reveal any distinct enlightenment. The Jew is restored to an equal place with the Gentile in the matter of discernment of the Gospel rather than to a place of greater privilege. The release, such as it is, will undoubtedly occasion a great turning to Christ among Israel after the rapture of the church, but by no means is the entire nation won to Christ. The Scriptures are relatively silent on the details, but there is evidence that a remnant turn to Christ (cf. the 144,000 of Revelation 7) and, that many do not turn to Christ (cf. the reestablishment of sacrifices and the Mosaic worship). While therefore the special blindness of Israel is lifted at the time of the rapture of the church, Israel is still in the same difficulty as the Gentile in that he is naturally blind to the Gospel and dead in sin. Apart from the work of the Holy Spirit in this period, certainly essential to salvation then as now, none of Israel would be saved even after the blindness is taken away.

The consummation of God's purpose in delivering Israel from their special blindness is found in the remnant that greets Christ at His second coming. It seems clear that before Christ returns Israel will turn to Christ and will formally acknowledge its sin. Zechariah 12:10 speaks of this: "And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplication; and they shall look unto me whom they have pierced; and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his first-born." The passage goes on to describe the mourning and the cleansing from sin that follows. It is apparently the divine preparation for the return of their Messiah. In the days of the awful tribulation of Israel, in which their ancient worship is once more prescribed and all natural Jews become the objects of persecution, there will undoubtedly be many more of Israel brought to Christ through the personal work of those previously saved. While many of the Gentiles will also be brought to Christ (Rev 7:9-14), it will be a special time for Jewish evangelism and it will be climaxed by the outpouring of the Spirit of God as a preparation for the return of Christ. The second phase of Israel's restoration is accomplished thus at the end of the tribulation, while the first phase occurs at its beginning.

The chief significance of Romans 11:25 does not, however, lie in its details. The important fact is that it indicates a termination of the present age of Gentile blessing in the Gospel and the preparation of Israel for a yet future period. Any interpretation of the passage which deals with the terms in their ordinary meaning demands a system of prophecy which allows for a future for Israel. The consummation of Romans 11:25 is described in the verses which follow: the national

salvation of Israel, the coming of the Deliverer out of Zion and the fulfillment of God's covenant with His ancient people. The important consideration involved in this revelation will constitute the eschatological problem to be discussed in the next article.

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