

**THE HISTORICAL OUTWORKING  
OF GOD’S PLAN TO DISPENSE  
HIS MERCY ILLUSTRATED  
IN THE OLIVE TREE OF  
ROMANS 11:16–24<sup>1</sup>**

by  
Samuel A. Dawson<sup>2</sup>

Salvation belongs to God. He planned it in eternity past. He procured it in history through his Son. He applies it to believers by means of the Spirit. Man did not plan it. Man did not procure it. And man does not apply it. God dispenses his salvation as he sees fit. And through the dispensing of his salvation God highlights his amazing mercy toward poor, miserable sinners who deserve judgment, not mercy.

And yet, as strange as it seems from a distance, those who believe they have benefitted from God’s mercy are prone to boast in their “perceived achievement” over those less fortunate. The Jewish Pharisee did so against the poor publican (Luke 18:9–14). And the Gentile is prone to do so against the Jew. Paul’s olive tree analogy “cuts” those who may boast in their “achievement” of God’s mercy down to size, warning them that if they continue to be arrogant God may “cut” them off from his mercy altogether.<sup>3</sup> To forcefully drive this point home Paul uses an olive tree analogy to establish the continuity *and* discontinuity of God’s plan in dispensing his mercy. And although Paul begins this analogy by emphasizing the one historical root from which God dispenses his mercy to both Jew and Gentile (continuity), he mainly emphasizes the diverse way in which God dispenses his mercy throughout history (discontinuity), which opens up a future salvation for Israel that is in harmony with Old Testament prophecies.

To back up this claim, we attempt to do several things in this article. *Chiefly*, we seek to establish the meaning of the context which surrounds this analogy, since we believe this analogy supports the meaning of the context, not makes meaning by itself. *Second*, having established

---

<sup>1</sup>It has been my privilege to have been the student and colleague of Drs. William W. Combs, Robert V. McCabe, and R. Bruce Compton. I have learned a great deal about Holy Scripture from them and it is my pleasure to dedicate this article to them.

<sup>2</sup>Dr. Dawson is Professor of Systematic Theology at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary in Allen Park, MI.

<sup>3</sup>I hold to the eternal security of the believer. All genuine believers persevere in faith and good works. They will never be “cut off” from God’s mercy. This journal article does not seek to defend this position.

the context's main thrust, we attempt to demonstrate how Paul's analogy helps support it. *Third*, having done this, we seek to demonstrate the validity of our claim by surveying both the discontinuity and continuity aspects of this illustration. In the process, we sketch out how we believe the discontinuity aspects harmonize with the Old Testament claim of a future salvation for Israel. To *conclude*, we stand back in amazement, with Paul, and marvel at God's amazing mercy.

**THE BROAD CONTEXT OF ROMANS:  
GOD'S MERCY DISPLAYED  
IN THE GOSPEL**

Paul was near the end of his third missionary journey. His great desire was to preach the gospel in areas where Christ had not yet been proclaimed (Rom 15:20–21), but he was running out of territory to do so (cf. Rom 15:19). Therefore, Paul wanted to take the gospel to Spain where Christ had not been named (Rom 15:28).

So Paul reaches out to the Romans, first to tell them that he wants to visit them personally in order to strengthen them (Rom 1:10–12), preach the gospel in Rome (1:13–15), regain his strength in Rome (15:32), and then hopefully obtain support from the Roman believers for advancing the gospel to Spain (15:24). Indeed, the gospel is the chief reason Paul writes Romans (cf. Rom 1:16–17).

Masterfully, Paul weaves the theme of the gospel into every section of this letter, as if writing a magnificent symphony of praise to God for his mercy displayed in the gospel. He starts out by demonstrating *the need for the gospel*. Gentiles are condemned sinners under the wrath of God (1:18–32). Jews are condemned sinners under the wrath of God (2:1–17), even the hypocritical Jewish moralist (2:18–3:8). Paul's accusation is stated clearly and forthrightly in Romans 3:9: "We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." The evidence is presented in verses 10–18 in order to support the accusation and it is God's testimony from the Old Testament. The verdict is rendered in verses 19–20. Mankind is guilty. Therefore, the gospel is needed, because of the universal condemnation of all mankind.

Leaving the despair of condemnation, Paul introduces the solution to man's dilemma in Romans 3:21–4:25. Here we find *the heart of the gospel*, which is justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, explained in 3:21–31 and illustrated, chiefly in the life of Abraham in 4:1–25.

This justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone leads to *the fruit of the gospel*, spiritual fruit, resulting in a secure hope of salvation (Rom 5:1–8:39)<sup>4</sup> that reaches its crescendo in Romans 8:38–39—only to enter into a minor key movement. Paul's own countrymen, the Jews, had rejected the gospel, even though one might have

---

<sup>4</sup>Douglas J. Moo's structural analysis of Romans 5–8 is helpful (*The Epistle to the Romans* New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 294).

thought that they surely would have welcomed it.

We will return to this minor key movement, but we want to notice the strong finish to Paul's magnificent gospel symphony in Romans 12:1–15:13. Here, Paul presents *the imperative of the gospel*. The gospel produces transformed living that demonstrates by experience that God's will "is good and acceptable and perfect." His will, or the imperative of the gospel, is lived out in the church (12:3–8), interpersonally (12:14–21), before civil authorities (13:1–7). It is summed up in the commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" (13:8–14), and is most clearly seen in righteous personal relationships among believers in the assembly (14:1–15:13).<sup>5</sup>

The burden of Paul in Romans is to demonstrate the power and righteousness of God in the gospel for all those who believe. It is necessary. It is available to all through Christ. It produces fruit that remains. It is dispensed by God. It leads to transformed living. It displays God's amazing mercy.

**THE NARROW CONTEXT (ROMANS 9:1–11:10):  
FOUNDATIONAL AND PRESENT EMPHASIS  
OF GOD IN DISPENSING HIS MERCY**

The Jews had rejected God's mercy through the gospel. This caused Paul "great sorrow and unceasing grief in [his] heart" over his countrymen (Rom 9:1–2). Even though the Jews had benefitted greatly from their relationship with God (9:3–5) through the fathers, they still refused to believe the good news that Jesus was the Christ the Son of God (cf. John 20:31). Had God's Word failed (9:6)? Paul answers this question by considering the foundational and present emphasis of God in dispensing his mercy.

***Foundational Emphasis on God Dispensing His Mercy***

The fact that Israel had rejected its own Messiah did not surprise God. It was never his plan to save all Jews of all time. And so Paul writes: "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (9:6), implying that only those Israelites whom God designed to save were saved. Indeed God's plan to dispense his mercy to Israel ran through the Israelite fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). God sovereignly chose these men in election, not vice-versa (9:7–13). The fact that God dispenses his mercy as he sees fit, without any conditions found in man (9:11) causes the depraved man to react negatively.

Two accusations immediately surface. *First accusation*: God is not just. He chooses to have mercy on one over another solely on the basis of his sovereign purpose (Rom 9:14a). It is not fair to choose one over the other, unless one is better than the other or more responsive than the other.

Paul dismisses the accusation out of hand: "May it never be!" To

---

<sup>5</sup>The gospel is also woven into the conclusion of Paul's letter.

charge God with unrighteousness, because he has chosen to work out his plan of salvation through electing love and ground his choice solely on his sovereign purpose, is unthinkable. God is God. What he does is always right. In the early days of God's mercy he had mercy on the Jewish fathers and Moses, but hardened the Gentile Pharaoh (Rom 9:18).

*Second accusation:* it is not right, then, for God to find fault, since man cannot resist his will (Rom 9:19). If God has mercy on whom he desires and he hardens whom he desires, then men have no *absolute freedom* to choose contrary to God's plan for dispensing his mercy in salvation. If this is so, then how can God find fault with man?

Paul immediately responds: "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Rom 9:20) In other words, "how dare you accuse God like this?" Paul finds the objector's position offensive. God is *not* wrong in holding sinful man responsible.

God is the potter. He fashions from the clay of humanity, which he created "one vessel for honorable use and another for common use" (Rom 9:21). He does so to setup a great contrast for all to see the riches of his glory. On the common vessels he demonstrates "His wrath...to make His power known," enduring "with much patience" these "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (9:22).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, God has mercy on, honorable vessels. Paul calls them "vessels of mercy," which is appropriate, for these vessels also deserve God's wrath, but instead receive God's mercy.

God works patiently with these "vessels of mercy" also; but, whereas God's patience has a *hardening* effect on the "vessels of wrath," his patience has a *softening* effect on the "vessels of mercy" (cf. Rom 2:4; 1 Tim 1:16–17). In fact, God has prepared these "vessels of mercy...beforehand for glory."<sup>7</sup> Thus Paul drives home his point that God is sovereign in salvation and he dispenses it as he sees fit "beforehand." It is his right to do so. He is in charge of the "olive tree" of his mercy. This foundational emphasis on the dispensing of God's mercy is paramount in understanding the present emphasis on God dispensing his mercy.

---

<sup>6</sup>Note that God, first, patiently waits ("endured with much patience") until the wickedness of the "vessels of wrath" fully ripen (cf. Gen 15:16 with Deut 9:1–6, 20–21). God does not judge sinners immediately. He did not destroy the human race at Adam's fall. God did not rush to judgment against Pharaoh. Instead, again and again, God reiterated his demands to Pharaoh giving him additional opportunities to repent.

<sup>7</sup>The insertion of "beforehand" in verse 23 indicates that God does not work with the "vessels of mercy" in the same way that he works with the "vessels of wrath." The "vessels of mercy," God chooses "beforehand." That is, God chooses some out of the lump of mankind in order to display his mercy on them (e.g., Isaac and Jacob). But the "vessels of wrath" are not prepared "beforehand." That is, they are not chosen. God passes them by, leaving them in their sin. Indeed, God is glorified in the display of his wrath and in the display of his mercy, but his glory is *greatly magnified* in the *contrast* between the two. When the redeemed see this contrast in all its glorious detail they will never, ever cease to praise God for all eternity for his gracious mercy (cf. Rev 5:12b–14).

***Present Emphasis on God Dispensing His Mercy***

In verses 24–29, Paul applies the truth of God's sovereignty in salvation to Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church ("even us," v. 24).<sup>8</sup> God is at present dispensing his mercy to two main people groups, which comprise all of humanity, Jews and Gentiles. He has "prepared beforehand" "vessels of mercy" for his glory from these two people groups, "not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles" (Rom 9:24).

Although Paul does not refer to the Gentiles as "wild olive branches" in Romans 9:25–26, he discusses their "calling" in terms that are consonant with being "wild olive branches." These Gentiles "who were not My people," God calls "My people," "sons of the living God."<sup>9</sup> They are the primary object of God's salvation plan presently. They are vessels on which he is displaying his mercy, having "prepared beforehand" to do so.

In verses 27–29 Paul turns his attention to the calling of the Jews.<sup>10</sup> While God is dispensing his mercy primarily to the Gentiles at this particular time in history, God is not through calling Israelites. Actually God's plan always had been to save a remnant of Jews as Paul confirms in verses 27: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the seas, it is the remnant that will be saved" (cf. Isa 10:22). Yet, saving the remnant is good for the nation as a whole; for, God had spared the whole nation because of the remnant. If no remnant, then no Israel (Rom 11:29; cf. Gen 18:22–23).

Currently, in this "age of grace" many more Gentiles are being saved than Jews, because God has chosen to save many more Gentiles than Jews. Again, has God's Word failed? No, God's Word has not failed (Rom 9:6). Israel had. They had failed to attain the righteousness God requires.

---

<sup>8</sup>The pronoun οὗς ("whom"), which begins verse 24, refers back to σκεῦη ἐλέους ("vessels of mercy") in verse 23. For support that these verses (9:24–29) form a thought unit, even though verse 24 opens with a relative clause, see Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 525.

<sup>9</sup>Paul applies Hosea 1:10; 2:23, which in its OT context refers to the northern tribes of Israel, to illustrate God's "new" work of calling out Gentiles for salvation. God is not transferring the promise he made to Israel in Hosea to the Gentiles. Instead, Paul is demonstrating that God's calling of Gentiles to salvation is in keeping with God's character and actions in the OT. The Jews, God's people, had refused the gospel. For the time being, God was now turning to the Gentiles, not exclusively, but primarily to work faith in their hearts (Rom 9:30). Those who once were *not* God's people are now his people. The "wild olive branches" are being "grafted into the rich root of the olive tree" to use Paul's analogy in Romans 11. See S. Lewis Johnson's discussion of Paul's use of Hosea in Romans 9:25–26, "Evidence from Romans 9–11," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 203–11.

<sup>10</sup>Although Paul does not refer to the Jews as "natural branches" here, we should keep this in mind.

### God's Mercy through Christ's Righteousness

The righteousness God requires becomes a dominant discussion point in the next section (9:30–10:4). *First*, shockingly, Paul tells us that even though the Gentiles were not pursuing righteousness, they had attained it by faith (9:30; cf. Rom 5:17).<sup>11</sup> *Second*, Israel, on the other hand, pursued righteousness through the Law (cf. Matt 12:8–32; 15:8–14; 23:23; Mark 7:8–13) but did not attain it because righteousness is received by faith, not earned through the Law (9:31–32a).

The Jews did not understand the true purpose and use of the Law. Had they believed the Law, they would have seen that Jesus was their Messiah, their only hope, for indeed they were law-breakers, not law-keepers. Instead, Israel's striving to earn righteousness through the Law caused them to stumble over Jesus, the Messiah, who came to call sinners, not the "righteous," to repentance (cf. vv. 32b–33 with Isa 28:16; cf. John 1:11; cf. 3:19). However, the Jewish remnant who believed in the Messiah were not disappointed. God justified them. And he will glorify them (v. 33b; cf. 8:28–30).

Despite Paul's great concern for his fellow-countrymen (Rom 10:1), the majority of them were rejecting the gospel. They did have a zeal for God, which Paul does not disparage outright (v. 2; cf. 9:31). Paul himself had experienced this kind of zeal (cf. Gal 1:13–14; Phil 3:7–8). However, zealous pursuit of righteousness through the Law is "not in accordance with knowledge" (v. 2). Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin, never the knowledge that one has merited righteousness (Rom 3:19–20). Instead righteousness that is acceptable to God comes from God, and not from man. What the Jews needed was the righteousness God gives, not the righteousness man earns. The Jews refused to believe what their father, Abraham, had learned (cf. Gen 15:6).

In fact the righteousness that is acceptable to God comes from Christ. He is "the end of the law." That is, he has brought the law to its goal. He fulfilled the Law perfectly (Matt 5:17) and the righteousness he obtained through it is available to anyone who will not stumble over Him, but believe in him (v. 4). This is mercy.

### Receiving Righteousness

So the question is: how does one receive this righteousness that

---

<sup>11</sup>Paul is right! The Gentiles were not pursuing righteousness. They really wanted nothing to do with it. They were impure in their lifestyle and degraded in their thinking. And even though many had given themselves over to different kinds of "respectable" philosophies, they actually had rejected God (Rom 1:18–32). Yet, wherever Paul went on his missionary journeys Gentiles were being saved. Churches were established in Antioch Syria, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Colosse, Thessalonica, Philippi, etc. For the most part these churches were filled with Gentiles. But how did the Gentiles attain righteousness if they were not pursuing it? *Answer:* the Gentiles attained to a righteousness that was not sourced in their works but was sourced in God and channeled through faith, which God gives to his chosen.

comes from God? Paul answers this question from both a negative perspective and positive perspective in verses 5–13. *First*, from a negative perspective, Paul explains that one cannot *receive* righteousness through the Law. Righteousness must be *earned* through the Law. You must *do* it perfectly (cf. Gal 3:12; Jas 2:10). You must “live by that righteousness, which is based on law” and no one can do so (cf. Phil 3:9; Gal 3:10; Rom 3:18–20). So no one receives righteousness through the Law.

From a positive perspective, Paul tells his readers how they can receive righteousness from God (vv. 6–13). *First*, acknowledge that one is a sinner and does not deserve God's mercy (v. 6a).<sup>12</sup> *Second*, acknowledge that human effort is meaningless. God has done all that is necessary to make righteousness available to men (vv. 6b–8).<sup>13</sup> *Third*, believe the word about Christ. Confess Jesus as Lord and believe in the heart that God has raised him from the dead, validating his Son's work (vv. 9–10). Salvation, then, comes from a believing response in the heart that bears outward evidence in verbal confession.<sup>14</sup> *Fourth*, Paul calls upon those who would receive God's gift of righteousness to come as they are, whether Jew or Gentile, because the righteousness that comes through the work of Christ is available to *all* who will call upon him in faith (vv. 11–13).<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup>Paul takes the phrase: “Do not say in your heart” from Deuteronomy 9:4. In the Deuteronomy context (Deut 9:1–6, esp. vv. 4–6) the Lord tells Israel not to say that they were crossing the Jordan because of their righteousness for they had none. By implication, the one who receives God's righteousness in Christ does not deserve it either. And that truth must penetrate into the heart.

<sup>13</sup>Paul uses Moses's warning in Deuteronomy 30:11–14, where Moses warns the children of Israel that God's will cannot be evaded by arguing that one does not know it. Instead it is not a secret, nor is it up to people to search it out in difficult and impossible places. God himself has made it known.

Paul uses this truth to demonstrate that the righteousness which comes from God through faith in the gospel is not something that man can accomplish. Just as Israel could not “go up to heaven” to fetch God's command and bring it down to mankind, so they could know what to obey; in a similar way Paul's readers did not “ascend into heaven” to bring Christ down to earth at his incarnation, or descend “into the abyss” to raise Christ from the dead. It was impossible for man to do this. God did the work necessary to bring righteousness to men. And God also sent the preacher/witnesses to proclaim to mankind the good news of salvation through Christ and man's consequential responsibility before God (Rom 10:8).

<sup>14</sup>Paul reverses the order of confession and heart-belief in verses 9–10, thus creating a chiasm:

- A. Confession (v. 9)
- B. Heart-belief (v. 9)
- B<sup>1</sup>. Heart-belief (v. 10)
- A<sup>1</sup>. Confession (v. 10)

The center of Paul's chiasm (B:B<sup>1</sup>) is “heart-belief.” Paul is emphasizing that genuine confession is rooted in and based upon genuine “heart-belief.”

<sup>15</sup>Quoting from Isaiah 28:16 again (cf. Rom 9:33b), Paul re-emphasizes that whoever believes in Jesus Christ will not be disappointed in the time of judgment by

### Proclaiming Righteousness

Next, Paul turns his attention to God's plan for the preaching of the gospel, the good news that the gift of righteousness is available through Jesus Christ. In reverse order we note that God sends or commissions the preacher; which means that the preacher is God's herald. He does not preach on his own accord (v. 15a). The God-sent preacher, therefore, delivers God's message (v. 14c). The gospel is not man's message. It was not made up by man and man (except Jesus) had nothing to do with its accomplishment. Believers are only heralds of what Christ has done, chosen by God to carry his message of salvation, as his ambassadors to this world.

The God-given message must be heard (v. 14b). God sends his messengers to places where people need to hear the gospel according to his plan to dispense his mercy. Finally, hearing the God-given message is not enough. It is the hearer's responsibility to believe the message (v. 14a). God's heralds who preach this message are beautiful in the sight of those who believe the gospel and beautiful to God also (v. 15; cf. Isa 52:7).

### Rejecting Righteousness

However, even though God has sent his preachers among the Jews, they did not respond in faith after hearing the word about Christ (v. 17). Israel rejected God's righteousness (vv. 16, 18–21). Paul considers that perhaps Israel never heard the gospel and concludes, "Indeed they have" heard (Rom 10:18). The proof: the gospel is now being proclaimed to Gentiles, and if it has gone to the Gentiles, then the Jews have heard it (cf. Rom 1:16 "to the Jew first") and are responsible to obey it.<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore the Old Testament Law and Prophets had already forewarned Israel concerning what God was currently doing in his salvific plan of dispensing his mercy (vv. 19–21). In the Law, Moses prophesied that God would *provoke* Israel and anger her by having mercy on foolish, sinful Gentiles (Rom 10:19). In the prophets, Isaiah pointed out that it is consistent for God to make himself known to

---

implication (cf. 1 John 2:28–29). And since Paul adds the word *πάς* ("all") to the phrase (not in Rom 9:33b), he emphasizes that God will save anyone who believes in his Son, Jew or Gentile.

<sup>16</sup>Interestingly, Paul quotes from Psalm 19:4 to support his point. In context David is referring to the general revelation of God's glory through creation (cf. Ps 19:1–3). Everyone, Jew and Gentile, all across the world are able to see the glory of God through creation. Some argue, as a result, that Paul is teaching that people may know enough truth to be saved through general revelation, without hearing the gospel from God-sent preachers.

However, the hearers in Paul's context are those who have "heard" the gospel from God-sent preachers and have not just "heard" about God in general revelation through the created order. Even in Psalm 19 it is the law of the Lord (his Word) that restores the soul (cf. Ps 19:7–11), not general revelation.

those who do not seek him (Rom 10:20; cf. Isa 65:1), like the Gentiles presently. Instead of responding in faith to what they heard in the gospel and read in the Law and the Prophets, Israel stubbornly disobeyed. Israel was and has always been “a disobedient and obstinate people” (v. 21; cf. Isa 65:2).

### Rejecting Israel?

Paul's conclusion in chapter 10 could not be clearer. Israel had rejected God. The burning question then is, has God rejected Israel (Rom 10:1)? Paul immediately answers: “May it never be!” (v. 1b), and then presents three lines of evidence to support his answer.

*First*, Paul himself is a Jew and God has saved him (vv. 1c–2a). God had only planned to save a remnant whom he foreknew. Paul was part of that foreknown remnant and he was miraculously saved on the Damascus Road.

*Second*, since Baal worship was rampant at the time when Ahaz and Jezebel ruled Israel, Elijah thought he was the only saved person in all Israel (vv. 2b–3). Yet, Elijah was wrong. God had saved Elijah and “kept” 7,000 Jews in northern Israel (vv. 2b–4).<sup>17</sup>

*Third*, even now, besides Paul, God is saving a remnant of Jews. Paul writes: “In the same way then, there has come to be at the present time a remnant” (v. 5a). “In the same way” in which God had chosen a remnant for salvation in the dark days of Baal worship in northern Israel, God had also chosen a remnant in the *darkest days* of Israel's existence, the dark days of the crucifixion of God's Son. A remnant of about 3,000 Jews were saved on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41) and by the time we reach Acts 4 some 5,000 men were saved (Acts 4:4). Obviously, God has not rejected Israel completely. Everyone he had foreordained to salvation had been saved, “according to God's gracious choice” (Rom 11:5). Man's efforts are not acceptable. Man's efforts are antithetical to grace (Rom 11:6).<sup>18</sup>

“What then” can we say about Israel's current situation? Israel has sought for righteousness through the Law, but she did not obtain it (Rom 9:30; 10:3; 11:7a). However, God has caused “those who were chosen” (elected ones) to attain to a righteous standing before him (11:7b) through faith. It is God's work. The rest who had not been “chosen” were “hardened” (Rom 11:8–10).<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup>The word “kept” pictures God as the initiator of the salvation of this remnant. These 7,000 were not saved because they were smarter than the rest. These 7,000 were saved because God had always foreordained for them to be saved. 7,000 is a symbolic number, I believe, corresponding to the perfect complete salvation of the chosen remnant at that time.

<sup>18</sup>Schreiner notes: “The existence of a remnant of believing Jews is not ultimately ascribed to their greater wisdom or nobility, or to their free will, or to their spiritual perception. The inclusion of the remnant in God's people is due to his electing grace” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 582). Man's attempt to earn salvation is offensive to God (v. 6).

<sup>19</sup>In hardening, God withdraws his restraining grace and permits the sinner to

**IMMEDIATE CONTEXT (ROMANS 11:11–32):  
FUTURE EMPHASIS ON GOD  
DISPENSING HIS MERCY**

Paul begins the immediate context by asking a second question:<sup>20</sup> “[Israel] did not stumble so as to fall, did they?” (v. 11a). In other words, is Israel’s failure to accept God’s offer of salvation through the Messiah irreversible or irrevocable? Have they stumbled so as to fall, as a nation, finally, permanently?

Paul’s immediate answer is again: “May it never be!” (v. 11b). It is inconceivable that God has finally (permanently) rejected Israel. In fact Paul presents God’s salvific plan for Israel in three sections in verses 11c–32 that point to a future salvation of “all Israel”:<sup>21</sup>

- (1) Making Jews jealous (11c–15)
- (2) Grafting in the natural branches (16–24)
- (3) Saving all Israel (25–32)

***Making Jews Jealous (vv. 11c–15)***

*First*, in verse 11c Paul considers the historical transition of God’s focus on dispensing his mercy from Jew to Gentile. Because Israel had rejected their Messiah, crucified him and failed to believe the heralds of the gospel which he had sent out to Israel in the first part of Acts, God turns his salvific attention to Gentiles.

Indeed, God did so to “make them [the Jews] jealous,” so they would eventually respond to him in faith. Gentile salvation leads to a “trickle” (“remnant”) of Jews being saved at first, but in the future, to a “torrent” of Jews being saved (“all Israel”), which will result in the greatest blessing for all mankind (vv. 12–15).

Verses 12 and 15 form an *inclusio*, in which Paul argues from the lesser to the greater. If the transgression and consequent rejection of the Jews has led to worldwide Gentile blessing, then Jewish fulfillment/acceptance (v. 12), demonstrated by their belief, will bring even greater blessing to the world (“life from the dead,” v. 15).<sup>22</sup>

---

continue in his own sin. God not only hardens the hearts of Gentiles (e.g., Pharaoh, cf. Rom 9:17–18), he also hardens the hearts of Israel. To prove this, Paul strings a series of references from the Old Testament—Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 29:10; and Psalm 69:22—in Romans 11:8–10. The Law, the Prophets and the Writings all concur that God hardens whom he desires, including Israel.

<sup>20</sup>I refer to Romans 11:11–32 as the immediate context because the olive tree analogy finds its place in this section.

<sup>21</sup>The clause “all Israel will be saved” does not refer to the salvation of all Israelites of all times (past, present, and future). Contextually, this is not God’s plan. Rather, the phrase refers to the eschatological salvation of a significant number of ethnic Israelites who repent of their sinful rejection of Messiah and embrace him in faith at his return. Zechariah, seemingly, limits this salvation to a third of Israel then living, with two-thirds of Israel cut off by battle and judgment (Zech 13:1–9; cf. Ezek 20:33–38). All that remain will be saved. See my section on discontinuity for further details.

<sup>22</sup>For possibilities of what “life from the dead” represents see Lyle J. Story, “An

Enveloped in the inclusion, is a snapshot of Paul's present ministry (vv. 13–14). In verse 13 Paul emphasizes to his Gentile readers that he is their Apostle. He magnifies this ministry. Indeed, Paul is hopeful that through the salvation of many Gentiles, God's plan of salvation from a larger perspective would cause many Jewish people to want the vibrant Christian life that many Gentiles possess (v. 14).

Skipping over the olive tree analogy for the moment (vv. 16–24), we move to the concluding section of Paul's argument that the rejection of Israel is temporary, not final. This is appropriate for our purposes because verses 25–32 (especially verses 25–29) are closely connected with verses 12 and 15. In verses 25–32, Paul describes what Jewish "fulfillment" (v. 12) and Jewish "acceptance" (v. 15) looks like: "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26).

### *Saving All Israel (vv. 25–32)*

Paul does not want his readers (mainly Gentile readers) to be uninformed of God's plan to dispense his mercy to Israel. He calls God's plan a "mystery." A "mystery" in Scripture is something that known by God but which has been hidden from human view and understanding. However, now, God is revealing it.<sup>23</sup>

So what is the "mystery" revealed in verse 25? *First*, it is not that all Israel will be saved. Paul quotes from at least two different Old Testament contexts to indicate that God has already promised to save all Israel (Isa 27:9; 59:20–21). Instead, the mystery is the timing and manner of Israel's salvation. "All Israel" will be saved *after* the full number of the Gentiles are saved.<sup>24</sup>

The details of the announced plan ("mystery") are four-fold:

- (1) Israel is hardened for a temporary period of time—"A partial hardening has happened to Israel" (v. 25c)
- (2) Gentile "fullness" precedes Jewish "hardening" being lifted—"until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25c).
- (3) After Gentile "fullness" then "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26a).
- (4) "All Israel will be saved" in connection with "the Deliverer" coming "from Zion" to keep his covenant promises with Israel and remove ungodliness and sin from Jacob (vv. 26b–27; Isa 59:20–21; 27:9).

---

Inclusive Olive-Tree (Romans 11:11–24)," *American Theological Inquiry* 3 (July 2010): 91.

<sup>23</sup>See D. A. Carson, "Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New," in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:393–436; Gary W. Derickson, "The New Testament Church as a Mystery," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166 (Oct–Dec 2009): 436–45; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "μυστήριον," by G. Bornkamm, 4:802–27.

<sup>24</sup>While most commenters hold to this interpretation, another interpretative option to consider is that "the fullness of the Gentiles" could refer to the end of Gentile reign on this earth (cf. Luke 21:20–24). Note that when Jesus returns to setup his Kingdom a Jew will now reign over the world, not Gentiles.

Meanwhile, from the historical standpoint of Paul and his readers, Israel had rejected the gospel and the Gentiles had benefitted. The gospel advanced to the Gentiles and many Gentiles were being saved (v. 28a). Yet, “from the standpoint of God’s choice” Israel is “beloved for the sake of the fathers” (v. 28b). Thus, Paul returns to the great theme of election to remind his readers that Israel had been chosen by God, as his own particular people through whom the Messiah would come and on whom he had set his special electing love “for the sake of the fathers” (“the rich root of the olive tree”). The reason that “all Israel will be saved” is because God remembers his promises which he made with the fathers and turns the heart of end-time Israel back to himself (cf. Ezek 16:60–63).

The fact that God will save “all Israel” is certain. Paul writes: “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). God’s “gifts” include his promises (cf. Rom 9:4–5); and his “calling” refers to his effective end-time call of “all Israel” to salvation (v. 29; cf. 8:28, 30; Zech 12–13; Isa 27:9; 59:20; etc.). God’s promises are permanently fixed and unalterable as to their fulfillment with the recipients of these promises. Paul reiterates the design of the plan to highlight the unfolding of God’s mercy in salvation to Jew and Gentile in verses 30–32.<sup>25</sup>

**THE OLIVE TREE ANALOGY:  
FOUNDATIONAL, PRESENT & FUTURE EMPHASIS  
ON GOD DISPENSING HIS MERCY**

Having looked at the narrow context, we are now ready to look at the olive tree analogy in verses 16–24. This is appropriate because an analogy’s job, at least this analogy’s job, is to highlight, reinforce, and emphasize what is being said in the context in a memorable way. Thus, we best understand what Paul’s olive tree analogy means when we understand what it is supporting or elucidating in the context.

As we intimated earlier, Paul’s driving objective in the context (cf. 11:25) and in this illustration is to quell Gentile arrogance toward Jews. This is easily seen in several direct statements Paul makes within the analogy itself to the Gentiles. *First*, Paul enjoins the Gentiles, “Do not be arrogant toward the branches” (v. 18). The fact that this might be a problem is seen in Paul’s allowance “but if you are arrogant” (v. 18). Paul even alludes to what some Gentiles in the Roman church may be thinking by putting words into their mouth: “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in” (v. 19). Paul acknowledges that these Jewish branches were broken off because of their unbelief, but calls upon the Gentiles not to be “conceited” but “fear” (v. 20), and warns them that if they continue in their arrogance God will not spare them either (vv. 20–23).

Now to accomplish his objective, Paul provides the Gentiles with the main reason for not boasting. God is in control of the process of

---

<sup>25</sup>We will return to verses 30–32 to highlight our survey points for discontinuity.

dispensing his mercy. The Gentiles are not; neither are the Jews. It is God's olive tree of mercy, not man's.

***Foundational Emphasis on God Dispensing  
His Mercy in the Olive Tree (v. 16)***

Verse 16 is transitional (δέ) and serves as a bridge between verses 11–15 and verses 17–24 (the olive tree analogy itself).<sup>26</sup> Verses 11–15 confirm that Israel still has a future (vv. 11b, 12, 15).<sup>27</sup> Paul is certain about this. Verses 17–24 prepare the way for the future salvation of “all Israel” (v. 26) through its use of the “root” (ρίζα)/“branches” (κλάσος) imagery. Verse 16 bridges these two sections (11:11–15, 17–24) by setting up two metaphors to make one point concerning the foundation of God dispensing his mercy.

The first metaphor (“first fruits,” ἀπαρχή; “lump,” φύραμα) alludes to Numbers 15:17–21<sup>28</sup> where Israel is to offer to the Lord the first of their dough (a small portion of it) in the Promised Land as an offering to the Lord. This “offering” is a first fruit of the dough, the rest of which they will eat from (Num 17:19). Paul alludes to this OT practice to argue that the first piece of dough consecrates the batch/lump.<sup>29</sup>

Central to our discussion is the identity of the “first fruits” and “dough” in the first metaphor, and the identity of the “root” and “branches” in the second metaphor. Some argue that the “first fruits” represent the Jewish Christian remnant.<sup>30</sup> They note that Paul uses first fruits elsewhere in his writings to refer to first converts (Rom 16:15; 1 Cor 16:15; 2 Thess 2:13). In addition they believe that OT and Jewish thinkers support this idea that the Jewish Christian remnant consecrates the Jewish people. Yet the OT and Jewish literature do not solidly

---

<sup>26</sup>Support in Schreiner, *Romans*, 599; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., International Critical Commentary (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 2:563; C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, rev. ed. Black's New Testament Commentary (New York: Continuum, 1991), 200; James D. G. Dunn, “Romans 9–16,” *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 651–52; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 307.

<sup>27</sup>Moo says that this future is introduced in verses 12, 15 without “explanation or substantiation” (Moo, *Romans*, 698).

<sup>28</sup>Svetlana Khobnya, “‘The Root’ in Paul’s Olive Tree Metaphor (Romans 11:16–24),” *Tyndale Bulletin* 64 (2013): 262; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 411; F. F. Bruce, “Romans,” *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 214; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1902), 326; Barrett, *Romans*, 200.

<sup>29</sup>See Schreiner, *Romans*, 599. For debate on why Paul alludes to Numbers 15:17–21 and what that means, cf. Moo, *Romans*, 699, n. 9; Cranfield, *Romans*, 563–64.

<sup>30</sup>Barrett, *Romans*, 200; Scott Hafemann, “The Salvation of Israel in Romans 11:25–32: A Response to Krister Stendahl,” *Ex Auditu* 4 (1988): 51; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 614; Schreiner calls this position “unnecessarily complicated” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 600).

support the notion that the Jewish Christian remnant does have a sanctifying effect on the whole of Israel.<sup>31</sup>

We are convinced that the “first fruits” represent the patriarchs. Clearly Paul views the “fathers” as the foundation of God’s salvific blessing to the Jews. The Israelite fathers are connected to Christ (Rom 9:5) and “spiritual Israel” (Rom 9:6) actually begins with the fathers; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Rom 9:7–13). Indeed God is going to save “all Israel” (Rom 11:26) not because they are connected to the Jewish Christian remnant, but because “they are beloved for the sake of the fathers.” Even the Jewish Christian remnant is chosen because of God’s love for the fathers (Rom 11:28). Now, since we are convinced that the metaphors are parallel,<sup>32</sup> the identification of the “root” is easy. “First fruits” and “root” represent the patriarchs and God’s salvific promises to them.

The identification of the “lump” and “branches” is normally viewed as the Jewish people in verse 16. Some do entertain the idea that the branches may represent Jewish Christians only, since according to verses 17–24 only Jewish branches that believe remain in the tree.<sup>33</sup> While this is certainly true, the branches broken off also refer to Jews, so it is best to view the “branches” in verse 16 as representing the Jewish people, as a whole (esp. 11:17–18).

The connection between the “first fruits”/“lump” and the “root”/“branches” is, as we have said, one of holiness. “If the first piece of dough is *holy* the lump is also, and if the root is *holy* the branches are too.” Thus, the holiness of the patriarchs (“first fruits”, “root”) conveys to all Israel a similar kind of holiness. What are the ramifications of this truth? From a negative perspective, Paul is not suggesting that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob possessed certain “qualities that earned spiritual

---

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 700. Assuming that the “lump” and “branches” are parallel and that the “natural branches” represent the Jews and the “wild branches” represent the Gentiles, how is it possible for the Jewish Christian remnant to have a sanctifying effect on the Gentiles also? Those who hold that the metaphors are not parallel do not feel any weight from this argument.

<sup>32</sup>For support that the two metaphors (“first fruits”/“lump;” “root”/“branches”) are parallel see Moo, *Romans*, 698–99. Some have suggested that Paul uses two metaphors for a purpose; so we should not collapse them together to make just one point. However, the fact that Paul would use two metaphors together to refer to the same thing has precedent in another Pauline passage. In 1 Corinthians 3:9 Paul uses an agricultural image (church is “God’s field”) and architectural image (church is “God’s building”) to refer to the church and then expands upon the architectural image only in verses 10–17. This is exactly what Paul does in Romans 11:16–24. He establishes the “holiness” concept with ἀπαρχή/φύρασμα and then expands the metaphor to ῥίζα/κλάδος, building upon the root/branches metaphor from then on (Morris, *Romans*, 600–01). For support that the metaphors are not parallel, see Cranfield, *Romans*, 564; Nils Alstrup Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 151.

<sup>33</sup>R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1936), 703; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 660.

benefits for themselves and their descendants.”<sup>34</sup> However, from a positive perspective the promises which the fathers received and transmitted were what God had set them apart to receive and to transmit in their salvation-historical role (cf. Rom 4; Gal 3).<sup>35</sup> Therefore the word “holy” (ἅγια) is not being used in the technical sense of being set apart by God for salvation, but in the more general sense of being set apart by God for special attention in the dispensing of his mercy, when the Gentiles “were disobedient” (11:30).

***Present Emphasis on God Dispensing His Mercy  
in the Olive Tree (vv. 17–22)***

It is true that God had set apart the Jewish fathers as the root of the olive tree of his mercy. But what was happening in the present?

**Some of the Jews Were Cut Off by God from the Rich Root of the Olive Tree of His Mercy (v. 17a).** Paul puts it mildly, but truthfully: “But if some of the branches were broken off.”<sup>36</sup> By using τινες (“some”) Paul stresses that not all the Jewish branches were broken off.<sup>37</sup> Only some were. Paul does not tell us how many, but from the context we know that only a remnant of Jews were saved (Rom 9:27–29).

Paul is restating in metaphorical terms what he has been arguing in Romans 9–11 that while Jews had received God’s blessings through the fathers, they now have been cut off from those blessings through God’s hardening (cf. vv. 7b–10) and their own unbelief (cf. v. 20).<sup>38</sup> However, since only “some” were cut off by God, “some” remained in the olive tree, which gives certain hope that God’s Word will be fulfilled to Israel (v. 12). They will be accepted (v. 15). In fact “all Israel” will be saved (v. 26).

**Some of the Gentiles (“Wild Branches”) Were Grafted by God into the Rich Root of the Olive Tree of His Mercy (v. 17b).** Presently,

<sup>34</sup>Moo, *Romans*, 700.

<sup>35</sup>See Moo, *Romans*, 701; J. L. Burns, “The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 203–7.

<sup>36</sup>This statement forms the protasis of a first class condition (εἰ+ indicative).

<sup>37</sup>The fact that the cut off branches are Jews is seen in the fact that they are called “natural branches” (κατὰ φύσιν) in verses 21, 24. The whole context of Romans 11 points to their Jewish identity, since as we have said an illustration derives its meaning from the context, because it is given to support the context. These natural branches “naturally” belong to the olive tree (v. 24). The reason they are broken off is because they have failed to believe God’s promises (11:20) given to the fathers, which ultimately focused upon Jesus Christ.

<sup>38</sup>It is significant that God is the one who breaks off the branches. The verb ἐξεκλάσθησαν (“broken off”) is an aorist passive. Moo calls it a “divine passive” (Moo, *Romans*, 701, n. 23); cf. William D. Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 154.

God has turned his attention in salvation history from the Jews to the Gentiles. The Gentiles are referred to as “wild olive branches.”<sup>39</sup> They have no natural connection to the rich root of the olive tree. And yet they were grafted by God (contrary to nature; vv. 17, 21, 24) among the branches that remain,<sup>40</sup> which do have a natural connection to the rich root of the olive tree. Not only were the Gentiles grafted in among the remaining Jews in the olive tree, they became partakers<sup>41</sup> with them of the rich root of the olive tree.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the Gentiles shared in the plan of God for dispensing his mercy through the rich root of the fathers.

Why did Paul pick the “olive tree” as an analogy to make this point? The easy answer is that the Spirit led him to do it. But still the question remains, why did the Spirit move Paul to use the analogy of the olive tree? Why not another tree, or plant? One reason may be that the olive tree is used as a symbol for Israel in the OT and other Jewish writings.<sup>43</sup> A second reason why Paul may have used the “olive tree” as an analogy is that the olive tree is “the most widely cultivated fruit tree in Mediterranean area.”<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>It stands to reason that since the Jews are the “natural branches,” the Gentiles are the “wild olive branches.” The context supports this contrast (cf. Rom 11:11–15). In addition, why did Paul call the Gentiles “wild olive” branches from a “wild olive tree”? Perhaps because the wild olive tree is an unfruitful tree and Paul means to prick the arrogance and pride of the Gentile believers (Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies*, 155–56).

<sup>40</sup>Some argue that ἐν αὐτοῖς (“among them”) actually should be translated “in the place of them,” that is in place of the Jewish broken off branches. But it is preferable to view the wild olive branches as being grafted in among the remaining Jewish branches into the rich root of the olive tree. So ESV; NIV; NASU; Moo, *Romans*, 701–2; Schreiner, *Romans*, 604; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:567; Käsemann, *Romans*, 308–9; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 661; Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies*, 154–56; Terence L. Donaldson, “‘Riches for the Gentiles’ (Rom 11:12): Israel’s Rejection and Paul’s Gentile Mission,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (Spring 1993): 84, n. 14; Morris, *Romans*, 413.

<sup>41</sup>Συγκοινωνός, a “sharer together,” is used in 1 Corinthians 9:23; Philippians 1:7; Revelation 1:9.

<sup>42</sup>For the debate as to why Paul would refer to “wild olive branches” being grafted into a cultivated olive tree, when this was not the normal practice, see C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1932), 179–80; Moo, *Romans*, 703, n. 33; William M. Ramsay, *Pauline and Other Studies in Early Christian History* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1906), 16–34; A. G. Baxter and J. A. Ziesler, “Paul and Arboriculture: Romans 11:17–24,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 24 (June 1985): 25–32; Dunn, *Romans*, 660–61; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 614–15; Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, trans. Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 168; Morris, *Romans*, 412–13; Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 328; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:86; Frederic L. Godet and Alexander Cusin, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1890), 2:247–48; Barrett, *Romans*, 201; Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:566–67; Käsemann, *Romans*, 308; et al.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. Jeremiah 11:16–19; Hosea 14:6–7; 2 Maccabees 1:29; Book of Jubilees 1:16; 1 Enoch 10:16; 26:1; 84:6; 93:10; et al.

<sup>44</sup>Dunn, *Romans*, 660–61.

A central question, however is, does the olive tree itself have a separate referent? There are a variety of answers. For example, Wilckens has concluded that the olive tree represents ethnic Israel.<sup>45</sup> If so, how can an ethnic Jew be broken off his ethnic root? And furthermore how can ethnic Gentiles become ethnic Jews or connected to the ethnic Israelite olive tree? Schreiner has a better solution: "Many ethnic Israelites had been severed from the olive tree because of unbelief, and believing Gentiles have been grafted onto the olive tree. Therefore, the olive tree is better described as the people of God, which is composed of both Jews and Gentiles."<sup>46</sup>

Although Schreiner has a point, I think it is better to view the olive tree itself as representing how God dispenses his mercy throughout history beginning with the patriarchs, the root of the olive tree. The olive tree does not mainly represent people. The root does. The branches connected to it do. But, the olive tree itself is not mainly used to focus on the amalgamated people of God from a synchronic point-of-view. Rather it is an illustration of the diachronic plan of God in dispensing his mercy in history from the root of the Israelite fathers to the salvation of all Israel.<sup>47</sup> So while I agree that the root of the olive tree emphasizes the continuity from which God dispenses his mercy, I also believe that the olive tree itself and how the branches relate to the root emphasizes the discontinuity of God's work of mercy with two people-groups through history. And discontinuity is a main emphasis of Paul in this analogy. This is the reason why Paul warns the Gentiles not to be arrogant. The plan of God for dispensing his mercy in history is going to turn once again at the end of the age to the Jews, "and so all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26).

There certainly is no sense in which Paul is seriously contemplating replacement theology such that the Gentiles, or the church (composed of Jew and Gentile), replace Israel, so that the church inherits all the promises which originally belonged to Israel. This is straining the analogy to the point of breaking it, since there is coming a day when "all Israel" will be saved (11:26). There is no replacement in this promise. Indeed, "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." What God has promised the Jews, and the Gentiles for that matter, he will do. And it is only in the rich root of the olive tree, its fatness, where God dispenses his mercy for Jew or Gentile, emphasizing continuity.

**Because God Grafted Gentiles into the Rich Root of the Olive Tree of His Mercy the Root Supports Them (v. 18).** Evidently, some of the

---

<sup>45</sup>Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer: Röm 6–11*, 3 vols., Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 6/2 (Zürich: Benziger/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1980), 2:246.

<sup>46</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 605; cf. Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 327; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 400; Barrett, *Romans*, 201; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 610.

<sup>47</sup>Neither Adam nor Noah are Paul's concern with the olive tree analogy.

Gentile believers in Rome were boasting in their new standing before God, not only elevating themselves, but looking down on the Jews in arrogance.<sup>48</sup> The apodosis of the conditional statement begun in verse 17 directly warns the Gentiles against this. Paul writes: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches.”<sup>49</sup>

Some suggest that Paul is concerned only in not being arrogant toward Jewish unbelievers.<sup>50</sup> Others suggest his instructions cover only Jewish believers.<sup>51</sup> However, it seems best to view Paul’s instructions as covering all Jews. Certainly Paul is telling the Gentile Christians that they stand by their faith, while the Jews were broken off for their unbelief (vv. 20–22). So it seems obvious that Paul would be telling believing Gentiles not to be arrogant toward unbelieving Jews. Yet, on the other hand, Paul is also concerned with Gentile Christians boasting over Jewish Christians and vice-versa (cf. Rom 14:1–15:13). Certainly then, Paul has all Jews in mind when he says to the Gentiles: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches.”

Paul follows up his command not to boast with another conditional sentence (εἰ + indicative [κατακαυχῶ]). The protasis, “but if you are arrogant,” assumes that some Gentiles were arrogant anyway. What exactly were the Gentiles arrogant about? Perhaps they felt superior because they had been chosen for salvation and not the Jew. Perhaps the Gentiles thought that since the Jewish Messiah was rejected by the Jews but welcomed by the Gentile, that the Gentiles had replaced Israel and were now the new people of God, completely and finally. Jews who desired to believe became part of the Gentile community of faith and were to abide by Gentile terms (14:1–15:13).

In actuality, the Gentiles had fallen into the same trap for which Paul condemned the Jews (cf. Rom 2:17–29). Pride is a human trap, not just a Jew, or Gentile trap (cf. Rom 14:1–15:13). Pride has no place in Christians, Jew or Gentile. Thus, Paul warns the Gentiles that they should not boast over the Jews because they do not support the root,

---

<sup>48</sup>Morris writes: “Paul does not say ‘Boast not,’ but ‘Boast not against’: it is not so much an attitude of ‘I am wonderful’ of which Paul is complaining as ‘I am more wonderful than you’ (*Romans*, 414). Κατακαυχῶ (Present, Middle, Imperative) combines “sinful pride and arrogant superiority” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “κατακαυχάομαι,” by R. Bultmann, 3:653; cf. Jas 2:13; 3:14). Cranfield argues that used with the genitive, as it is here, it means “to triumph over” (*Romans*, 2:567).

<sup>49</sup>This is a first class conditional structure (εἰ + indicative), which Moo refers to as a “factual condition” not because of the structure, but because of the context (Moo, *Romans*, 701, n. 21). Cf. Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), 102–4, nn. 303–6; William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 341; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 679–712.

<sup>50</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “κατακαυχάομαι,” 3:654; Barrett, *Romans*, 201; Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:86–87.

<sup>51</sup>Cranfield, *Romans*, 568; Godet and Cusin, *Romans*, 247–48.

representing the Jewish fathers, but the root supports them.<sup>52</sup> The Gentiles should “remember” this truth.<sup>53</sup>

Continuity is emphasized in this argument. Only one root of one tree (the cultivated olive tree) is the place where God's salvific mercy may be found. If you are not connected to the root system of this tree, and in fact if you do not remain in the root system of this tree you will not receive God's mercy. And physical descent is not the ultimate reason for God's dispensing of his mercy. Paul argues throughout Romans that physical descent does not bring salvation (2:25–29; 9:6b–29). All Jews *and* Gentiles are under sin's dominion and power (1:18–3:20). Both need to respond to the gospel to receive God's mercy (3:21–4:25). And God only has mercy on those who are connected to the Jewish root.

Gentiles who boast against Jews are showing disdain for the Jewish root. Yet the Gentiles actually depend on the Jewish root for their own spiritual nourishment (v. 17). And this arrangement is permanent and continuing, as Paul's use of the present tense verb (βασιάζεις) emphasizes. It is utter folly, then, for the Gentiles to triumph over the Jews in their thinking and actions, when in reality they are being nourished by the richness of the mercy God displayed on the root (the Jewish fathers).

**Faith Is the Criterion which Determines Whether God Cuts Off or Grafts Branches into the Olive Tree of His Mercy (vv. 19–21).** Paul anticipates the Gentile response in verse 19: “You will say branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.”<sup>54</sup> The Gentiles retort that they are the center of God's plan of salvation now. The Jews were removed from the root, so that Gentiles might be grafted in. Thus, God's plan of dispensing his mercy had pointed to them all along and that is why more Gentiles are being saved now than Jews. In point of fact the Gentiles probably believed that they had replaced Israel finally and completely in terms of the center of God's mercy and purposes.

---

<sup>52</sup>Paul emphasizes this grammatically. The abruptness of the beginning of the apodosis, the strong adversative (ἀλλά), the negative (οὐ) preceding the personal pronoun (σὺ), the object (τὴν ῥίζαν) preceding its verb (βασιάζεις), and the ellipsis of the missing verb (“supports”) indicates the strength of Paul's assertion: “Not you the root supports, but the root you” (cf. Morris, *Romans*, 414, n. 82).

<sup>53</sup>The Greek word for “remember” is not used in this text. One has to supply it, or some such word (NASU, ESV, and NRSV supply “remember;” NIV [1984] supplies “consider;” HCSB does not supply the word). This is an instance of brachylogy, an omission of words that are not required by the grammar but must be supplied to understand the thought (see Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], 256, n. 483; Moo, *Romans*, 704, n. 40).

<sup>54</sup>Longenecker calls this a “diatribal dialogue,” where Paul places an argument in the mouth of Gentiles to make his point (Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011], 411).

Paul responds to the Gentile claim with a “qualified agreement.”<sup>55</sup> Paul himself has argued that Jewish rejection by God has led to God’s mercy being extended to the Gentiles. God, in fact, has hardened the hearts of the Jews and as a result salvation’s attention has been focused on the Gentiles (11:7–15). So the Gentiles’ claim is partially true. But half-truths, in this situation, led to arrogant thoughts and actions.<sup>56</sup>

Paul notes in verse 20 that the Jews were actually broken off because of their unbelief (τῆ ἀπιστία).<sup>57</sup> God had rejected them because they had rejected his Son. As a result, Paul warns the Gentiles that they are only safe if they stand by their faith (v. 20),<sup>58</sup> otherwise God would not spare them either (v. 21).

To Schreiner there is discontinuity in this arrangement: “[God] planned salvation history in such a way that Israel would be hardened while the fullness of Gentiles entered into the people of God (vv. 12, 15, 25).”<sup>59</sup> When Israel rejected the Messiah, God turned his salvific attention to the Gentiles, whom he had mercy on, as they welcomed his Son by faith. This salvation-historical discontinuity did not happen by man’s will or effort (Rom 9:16). In the days of the Gentile Pharaoh, God had mercy on the Jews. But now in the days of Jewish rejection of the Messiah, he has mercy on Gentiles, in the main. God “will have mercy on whom He will have mercy” (Rom 9:15).

Paul reiterates his command in verse 18 (“do not be arrogant

<sup>55</sup>Moo, *Romans*, 705.

<sup>56</sup>Paul uses the Greek word καλῶς which could possibly be translated, “well enough,” meaning this is not the whole story (Morris, *Romans*, 414). Cranfield notes that “to such an egotist this half-truth seems a conclusive proof of his own superior importance and a sufficient justification for his contemptuous attitude” (Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:568).

<sup>57</sup>Τῆ ἀπιστία. Morris calls this an “unusual dative” (Morris, *Romans*, 414, n. 85). Nigel Turner believes it is “extraordinary” (*Syntax*, ed. James H. Moulton, in *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, 4 vols. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963], 3:242). Morris (*Romans*, 414, n. 85), Turner (*Syntax*, 3:242), Käsemann (*Romans*, 310), Moo (*Romans*, 705, n. 45), Cranfield (*Romans*, 569, n. 1), and BDF (105, n. 196) classify it as a dative of cause. C. F. D. Moule sees it as probably instrumental (*An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. [London: Cambridge University Press, 1959], 44).

<sup>58</sup>Ἐστηκας is perfect active of ἵστημι, which used intransitively may mean “to stand firm.” Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 221, n. 108. Cf. Romans 5:2; 1 Corinthians 7:37; 10:12; 15:1; 2 Corinthians 1:24; Ephesians 6:11, 13.

Cranfield notes the τῆ ἀπιστία and τῆ πίστει are both causal; “and it is to be noted that there is no warrant for understanding one differently from the other. It is...the very fact of their unbelief, and by the very fact of their faith, that the ones are cut off and the others stand” (Cranfield, *Romans*, 569, n. 1). Cf. M. J. LaGrange, *Saint Paul Epître Aux Romains* (Paris: Etudes Bibliques, 1916), 281. To Moo, τῆ πίστει might be causal, but he prefers to view it as instrumental, “since it relates to the Gentile Christians continuing relationship to God” (Moo, *Romans*, 705, n. 45; *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. “πιστεύω,” 6:218; Dunn, *Romans*, 663). Schreiner calls it a dative of means. They stand by means of their faith (Schreiner, *Romans*, 607, n. 9).

<sup>59</sup>Schreiner, *Romans*, 607.

toward the branches”), using a different expression, at the end of verse 20: “Do not be conceited.” Basically, ὑψηλὰ φρόνει (“do not be conceited”) means that you must not have a high opinion of yourself.<sup>60</sup> As Paul puts it in Romans 12:16: “Do not be haughty in mind” (ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες; cf. 1 Tim 6:17; Prov 3:7). Obviously, the Gentiles were exalting themselves in their minds against the Jews. They had wrongly interpreted God’s salvific focus on them as a sign of their superiority. The fact that they were boasting in their status, rather than in Christ, means that *they* could be dangerously close to being cut off themselves (Rom 3:27–30). Morris writes: “To trust in God and be proud of one’s spiritual achievement is mutually exclusive.”<sup>61</sup>

Instead as the Gentiles contemplate their salvation in the unfolding plan of God dispensing his mercy, they should “fear.” They are only connected to God’s mercy at God’s pleasure (“God’s kindness” [v. 22]). The Jews were removed because of their unbelief and the Gentiles only stand by their faith. So they should “fear,” not be proud (cf. Phil 2:12; 2 Cor 7:1; Col 3:22; Heb 4:1; 1 Pet 1:17; Prov 3:7).<sup>62</sup>

In verse 21 Paul explains why (γάρ) the Gentiles should not “be conceited but fear.” “For if God did not spare the natural branches; He will not spare you either.” If God did not spare the Jew who refused to believe, he certainly will not spare the Gentiles who refuse to believe. The Jews had a natural (κατὰ φύσιν) connection to the root of the cultivated olive tree. The Gentiles do not. If God did the harder in removing the natural branches, he certainly will do the easier in removing the wild branches. Based on this truth, Paul calls upon his Gentile readers, in the main, to “behold” the “kindness and severity” of God (v. 22).

**Continuing Faith (Remaining in the Olive Tree of God’s Mercy) Is a Result of God’s Kindness (v. 22).** God will spare neither Jew nor Gentile who does not continue in faith, so Paul calls upon his readers to carefully observe<sup>63</sup> God’s “kindness and severity.” One who fears God rejoices in his “kindness.” Gentiles certainly should behold the kindness of God to them.<sup>64</sup> They had been grafted into the olive tree of God’s mercy through faith (v. 17), and they had been made to stand (continue to remain in the olive tree) in faith (v. 20) through God’s “kindness.”

---

<sup>60</sup>BDAG, 1065.

<sup>61</sup>Morris, *Romans*, 415.

<sup>62</sup>Calvin insightfully writes: “For the rejection of the Jews should never come across our minds without striking and shaking us with dread” (John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 430.

<sup>63</sup>Ἴδε, “see” or “notice” (from ὁράω). This does not emphasize “thinking about,” although this certainly is not foreign to idea (cf. BDAG, 719–20).

<sup>64</sup>Χρηστότητα—goodness, from χρηστότης. In Romans 2:4 Paul refers to God’s kindness as a patient attribute of God that should lead mankind to repentance. If that is true of all mankind in general, then certainly it should be true of all believers who marvel at God’s kindness, which actually led them to repentance (BDAG, 1090).

But the “kindness” of God cannot be truly appreciated apart from contrasting it with the “severity” of God.<sup>65</sup> “Severity” reinforces the fact that God did not spare the natural branches (v. 21).<sup>66</sup> Indeed God’s severity toward unbelief is unrelenting. Putting both God’s severity and kindness in focus helps one see the antidote to pride. The antidote is to focus on God and not on oneself.<sup>67</sup>

Paul sets up an observable contrast for his readers.<sup>68</sup> First of all he contemplates the severity of God against<sup>69</sup> the Jews who fell.<sup>70</sup> In contrast, God had turned his “kind” attention to the Gentiles. Instead of sending his heralds to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (cf. Matt 10:6; 15:24), he was sending his heralds to the Gentiles. Instead of having mercy on the Jews, he was having mercy on Gentiles, in the main. The Gentiles needed to “behold” this, and rather than respond in arrogance, they should respond in humble gratitude for God’s “kindness” to them.

Furthermore, this observation of God’s kindness should lead the Gentiles to persevere in their faith. “God’s kindness” is meant for those who “continue in His kindness.”<sup>71</sup> God’s kindness is not just a past act that has no continuing benefit; it is indeed a continual relationship of kindness, in which the believer must persevere (cf. Col 1:23; Heb 3:6, 14). If the Gentile does not continue in God’s kindness, Paul

---

<sup>65</sup>Cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 608. The OT authors frequently contemplate both the “kindness and severity” of God (Ps 125:4–5; Isa 42:25–43:1; 50:10–11; Nah 1:4–7). Cf. Murray, *Romans*, 2:88, n. 40.

<sup>66</sup>The Greek word ἀποτομία is used only in this verse in the NT. Its cognate ἀποτόμως is used in 2 Corinthians 13:10 and Titus 1:13 to indicate the severity in which God’s ministers can carry out their reproof or discipline (cf. BDAG, 124).

<sup>67</sup>Schreiner helpfully notes: “The Gentiles were prone to pride because they focused on themselves rather than on God, considering that their ethnic superiority rendered them candidates for election. The antidote to pride is fear, and the object of fear is God himself, particularly his kindness and severity” (Schreiner, *Romans*, 608).

<sup>68</sup>Μὲν...δέ/. Note chiasmic structure:

- A. “Behold then the kindness
- B. And severity of God;
- B<sup>1</sup>. To those who fell, severity,
- A<sup>1</sup>. But to you, God’s kindness.”

<sup>69</sup>The preposition ἐπί should, in all likelihood, be translated “against,” signifying a hostile opposition toward (cf. BDAG, 366).

<sup>70</sup>In verse 11 Paul confirms that Israel ultimately will not fall permanently. In verse 22, on the other hand (πίπτω), Paul affirms that the fate of those who are not part of the remnant is to fall permanently (cf. v. 20).

<sup>71</sup>Although there is no personal pronoun in the Greek (τῇ χρηστότητι with the article), “the kindness” referred to is God’s kindness (v. 22a), not the believers’ kind actions (although believers are to do good deeds). Nor is Paul saying that believers must continue to merit God’s kindness. Paul is simply warning against a false sense of security. One must persevere in “God’s kindness,” which is tantamount to persevering in the faith (cf. Morris, *Romans*, 416; Cranfield, *Romans*, 570).

concludes, “you will be cut off;” God will deal with you severely.

This warning is serious and on its basis one should not conclude that if they have believed at one point in their life, they are eternally secure no matter how they behave or believe in the future. Still, Paul's intent with this illustration is not to discuss the particular election of each individual. Instead, he is contrasting Jews and Gentiles as a whole in terms of God's saving mercy, as it is dispensed in history.<sup>72</sup>

***Future Emphasis on God Dispensing His Mercy  
in the Olive Tree (vv. 23–24)***

Ever so slightly, Paul now turns his focus toward verse 26 where he will announce: “And so all Israel will be saved.” He begins this journey in verse 23 by intimating to the Gentiles that the Jews will be grafted back into their own olive tree, “if they do not continue in their unbelief.”<sup>73</sup> Obviously, the only faith which God would accept from the Jews would be faith in Christ, whom they had stumbled over and rejected (9:30–10:21). But “if” they believed in Christ, the Jews would be grafted in again.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, Paul focuses Gentile attention on God's work in this regard. “God is able to graft them [the Jews] in again.” Now why would Paul emphasize God's ability (δυνατός) to graft Israel back into their own olive tree? There is no doubt that restoring the cast away branches would be a miracle of God's gracious kindness. It is certainly something

---

<sup>72</sup>Although Hodge ties the olive tree illustration to the blessings of the church of God, he does instructively write: “Paul is not speaking about the connection between individual believers and Christ, which he has fully taught in chapter 8 and elsewhere, is indissoluble, but about the relationship of communities to the church and its various privileges. No promise or covenant on the part of God guarantees that the Gentiles will enjoy these blessings throughout all generations any more than there was any such promise to protect the Jews from the consequences of their unbelief. The continuation of these favors depends on the conduct of each successive generation. Therefore, Paul tells the Gentile that he must continue in the divine favor: ‘otherwise you will be cut off’ (Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1886], 370). Calvin also writes: “Paul speaks not here of the special election of individuals, but sets the Gentiles and Jews in opposition the one to the other” (Calvin, *Romans*, 433).

<sup>73</sup>Schreiner makes a good case to begin a new paragraph in verse 23. Most connect verse 23 to the olive tree section beginning in verse 16 or 17 and ending in verse 24. But Schreiner points to *κακεῖνοι δέ* (and those) in verse 23 as beginning a new unit. Schreiner also sees a new theme introduced. While Gentile pride remains a concern (v. 25), “the emphasis is now on the regrafting of the Jewish branches onto the olive tree and the promise that eschatological salvation awaits Israel.” See Schreiner for further support of treating verses 23–27 as a unit (Schreiner, *Romans*, 611–12). While Schreiner's structural comments are helpful, the olive tree illustration, which is the subject of this article, continues through verse 24. Moo also argues that *κακεῖνοι δέ* marks an emphatic subject change, even though he treats the section as vv. 16–24 (Moo, *Romans*, 707, n. 58).

<sup>74</sup>To Cranfield this seems inevitable. Once the Jews return to Christ they will be grafted back in and “the Gentile church” should not “pass judgment on them, but rather to expect this miracle with eagerness” (Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:570).

an olive tree gardener would not attempt to do.<sup>75</sup> But God is the One “who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist” (Rom 4:17). God, in fact, has promised to do just this for Israel (Rom 11:26–29) and he is able and willing to do what he has promised (cf. *δυνατός*, Rom 1:16; 4:21).<sup>76</sup> So any Gentile belief that they are now God’s special focus and the Jews have been discarded completely and forever is foolishness.

Verse 24 presents an additional reason (*γάρ*) for God’s willingness to graft the natural branches back into their own olive tree, when they believe.<sup>77</sup> The method Paul uses to present his reason is a “greater to lesser argument.”<sup>78</sup> If God has grafted wild olive branches from the wild olive tree, to which they belonged by nature, into the cultivated olive tree, “how much more” will God graft the natural branches back into the cultivated olive tree to which they belong by nature (*κατὰ φύσιν*).

For sake of argument, it clearly was “harder” for God, to graft wild olive branches into a cultivated olive tree, because they themselves, were cut off from a wild olive tree. Yet God did it. So certainly God can and will do the “easier;” graft the natural branches back into their own tree, especially since God has covenanted with the Jews to do so (11:27).

In fact, the plan to dispense God’s mercy to both Jew and Gentile has its foundation based in God’s covenant with the root. The root of the fathers is never abandoned or “uprooted.”<sup>79</sup> Rather from this root God’s mercy is extended to both Jew and Gentile. And since the Jew is related to the patriarchal promise of Christ, “according to the flesh,” it is more natural to graft the natural Jewish branches back into these promises in keeping with the covenant.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup>Paul certainly is not concerned with the normalities of aboriculture in his illustration. It seems hard to think that discarded branches would be regrafted into the same olive tree again in aboriculture practice. Morris writes: “If the orchardist wanted certain branches in his tree he would never have cut them off in the first place. But Paul is not talking about orchardists; he is talking about God, and the orchard is no more than an illustration” (Morris, *Romans*, 417).

<sup>76</sup>It is interesting to note the relationship between Romans 1:16 and Romans 11:23. The gospel is God’s power (*δύναμις*) for salvation and it will be the gospel believed, that will move God in power (*δυνατός*) to regraft the Jews into their own olive tree (11:23). Cf. Reidar Hvalvik, “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25–27,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (February 1990): 91.

<sup>77</sup>KJV, NASU view verse 24 as a question; NRSV as a statement; NIV as an exclamation. Regardless, the logic is clear.

<sup>78</sup>Moo, *Romans*, 708; Schreiner, *Romans*, 613.

<sup>79</sup>Murray writes: “The patriarchal root is never uprooted...thus it continues to impart its virtue and impress its character upon the whole organism of redemptive history. The ingrafting of Israel is for this reason the action of which all actions is consonant with the unfolding of God’s world wide purpose of grace. This signally exemplifies the great truth that the realization of God’s saving designs is conditioned by history” (Murray, *Romans*, 2:90).

<sup>80</sup>In actuality, Paul’s argument is not connected to God’s power/ability, as if it

This obviously does not mean that the Jews are “easier” to save because they have more holy tendencies than the Gentiles. It does not mean that the Jews are more open to the gospel. Not so, as history has proven. Paul has concluded that both Jew and Gentile are under sin, dominated by it (Rom 1:18–3:20). Jews have no advantage in salvation in this way. Both Jew and Gentile must be saved by God's great mercy and grace. Salvation belongs to God and he dispenses it as he wills, on “vessels of mercy which He prepared beforehand for glory” (9:23), whether they be Jew or Gentile. The proper response of all is to fear God's severity and be grateful for God's kindness.

#### **A WORD ABOUT DISCONTINUITY IN THE OLIVE TREE ANALOGY**

Paul means business in calling for an end to Gentile arrogance. He warns against Gentile arrogance directly in the olive tree analogy. He reveals to the Gentiles a mystery in God's plan to dispense his mercy, so that the Gentiles “will not be wise in [their] own estimation” (v. 25). And he reiterates God's historical plan to dispense his mercy in verses 30–32. One cannot escape the conclusion that God is in control of dispensing his mercy and he has done so in a discontinuous fashion. The biblical evidence supports this discontinuity. We briefly survey it.

#### ***Gentile DisobediencelJewish Focus: The Foundational Emphasis***

*“For just as you once were disobedient to God...” (Rom 11:30a)*

The proper starting place for God's particular focus on the Jews has to be the fathers. In fact, Paul turns his attention, first of all, to the fathers when demonstrating that God's Word has not failed (Rom 9:6). Out of all the humans on the planet, God in mercy chose Abraham to be the head of the Jewish race, and justified him, when he believed God's promises to him (Rom 4). God also justified Abraham's son Isaac not Ishmael (9:7–9). And furthermore, God justified Isaac's son Jacob through Rebecca, not Esau (Rom 9:10–13). Thus the spiritual and physical root was formed and God began to prepare Israel as a people.

Jacob became the father of 12 Jewish patriarchs, eleven of whom sold one of their brothers, Joseph, into slavery. Joseph ended up in Egypt, according to the good plan of God, overcoming the evil intent of his brothers. During this early time of Israel's formation God provided for Israel in Egypt and multiplied her seed.

Gentile disobedience reared its ugly head as Pharaoh turned against Israel, being concerned about their size and strength. Worried by the

---

were easier for a powerful God to do this. Rather it is the fitting thing to do and that is why it is easier. Paul's argument is not ultimately “how much more easier,” but more along the line of “how much more fitting” and therefore “how much more certain,” since God has promised to save all Israel, to begin with. See Patrick Boylon, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1947), 182.

prospect of Israelite rebellion, he put Israel to hard slave labor for his building plans, and made their life miserable, even killing all their baby boys.<sup>81</sup>

God spared Moses through whom he had mercy on Israel, and delivered them through many miracles, bringing them to Mount Sinai, where he entered into covenant with them in what may be called the Constitution of the United Tribes of Israel (the Mosaic Covenant).

Still they rejected God's way, refusing to conquer the Promised Land for fear of the Canaanites. Thus they wandered in the desert for 40 years, because of their disobedience. Yet after 40 years, when the generation who had refused to obey God had died in the wilderness, God marshalled his army of Israelites through Joshua to punish Gentile disobedience in Canaan and claim the land God had promised to their fathers; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

However, instead of continuing on in thankful obedience to God, Israelites who grew up in the generations after Joshua rebelled; were judged/punished; cried out to God for deliverance; were delivered by God-appointed judges; only to repeat the cycle again and again and again. Still throughout all of this, God's dispensing of his mercy to Jews did not cease.

When faced with outside enemies, Israel finally wanted a king, but they wanted a king like all the other nations had. And so God allowed them to have Saul as their first king, before establishing the line of David from the tribe of Judah. David was a mighty man of God, who was also a man after God's own heart. And God had mercy on Israel through David. However, even he disobeyed grievously, and so did his son Solomon, who was the second wisest man ever to live on the face of planet earth (Jesus being the first).

After Solomon, one may characterize the times of the Davidic kings from Rehoboam to Zedekiah as similar to the period of the judges. However, this time their sinful activities ripened to the point that their rebellion ended up in the Deuteronomic curse of captivity, the Northern tribes to Assyria (722 B.C.), the Southern tribes to Babylon (586 B.C.). Still God did not turn his attention of mercy away from Israel. He regathered Judah back to the Promised Land from Babylon, and began to lay the foundation for the coming work of his Son, the Messiah.

In the fullness of time (Gal 4:4), God sent forth his Son from heaven to be born of the Jewish virgin Mary in order to "save His people [Israel] from their sins" (Matt 1:21). To shepherds in fields near Bethlehem an angel of the Lord announced the birth of Jesus their Savior, "who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). So God sent the Messiah, his Son, the Savior to Israel. As Mary said to Elizabeth: "He [God] has

---

<sup>81</sup>Gentile disobedience during this era begins with the Canaanites against Abraham and stretches all the way to the Roman soldiers crucifying the Messiah. Only a remnant of Gentiles were saved during Gentile "disobedience to God" (Rom 11:30a), like Rahab and Ruth.

given help to Israel His servant, *in remembrance of His mercy*, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and his descendants forever.” Once again, God displayed his mercy to Israel; this time in the sending of his Son who came to Israel.

Jesus himself owned this mission. The very first recorded words he spoke after his baptism were to Israelites, to whom he said: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). In keeping with his focused mission on Israel, he sent the twelve to minister to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (cf. Matt 10:5–6). He personally told the Syro-Phoenecian, Gentile woman who asked him to have mercy on her demon-possessed daughter: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24).<sup>82</sup>

The preaching of Christ to “repent for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand” was authenticated by the many miracles Jesus did (Matt 4:24–25; 8:16; 9:35; 12:15; 15:30; etc.). These miracles demonstrated that Jesus was who he claimed to be, their Messiah. Indeed, the very miracles he performed on the day in which the enemies of Jesus committed the unpardonable sin, had been predicted of Messiah by Isaiah centuries earlier. Isaiah had declared that Messiah would open “the eyes of the blind” and cause the “mute [to] shout for joy” (Isa 35:5–6). This is exactly what Jesus did when he cast the demon out of a man who was blind and mute, causing the man to both see and speak (Matt 12:22).

There were only two choices for the religious leaders in this case. Either Jesus was the Messiah, or else he was in league with the devil. Sadly the religious leaders, representing Israel chose the latter; declaring: “This man casts out demons by Beelzebul the ruler of the demons” (Matt 12:24).

The Pharisees early rejection of Jesus hardened and deepened all the way through the Triumphal Entry to the point of ultimate rejection when they cried out to Pilate: “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him! ... We have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). Even in spite of the blatant evidence that Jesus had risen from the tomb,<sup>83</sup> they still rejected him.

Peter even confronted the Jews on the day of Pentecost with the truth: “This Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power” (Acts 2:23–24). Still, only a remnant of Jews believed Peter’s message on this fateful day.

From that time on the Jewish leaders intensified their rejection of

---

<sup>82</sup>Eventually, the King would take care of Gentiles, like this Syro-Phoenecian woman, but, Israel’s Davidic covenant rights come first and then the privilege of the kingdom will be received by the Gentiles in humble faith as blessings falling from the table of Israel in full accordance with the Old Testament prophets (Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1959], 305).

<sup>83</sup>Roman soldiers were stationed to guard the tomb, but they failed to keep Jesus in the tomb. The tomb was empty.

the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and his people. The record of their persecution in the book of Acts is appalling. For example:

- (1) Gospel preaching incensed Jews and they demanded it cease (e.g., Peter healing lame man; Peter's second sermon; Peter and John before Sanhedrin—cf. Acts 3:13–16; 4:1–3, 18–22).
- (2) Insanely jealous High Priest and Sadducees imprisoned and beat Apostles (Acts 5:12–42).
- (3) Jewish Council stoned Stephen to death (Acts 7:54–60).
- (4) Saul, a Pharisee, stepped up persecution of the church (Acts 8:1–4; 9:1–2).
- (5) Saul is saved and Jews began to plot his death (Acts 9:23–25).
- (6) Herod martyred James and imprisoned Peter (Acts 12:1–19).
- (7) Jews continually persecuted Paul and his associates on their missionary journeys (Acts 13:44f).

Paul has told the truth in Romans 11:28, the Jews “are enemies of the gospel.” The evidence is vast and plain. Therefore God discontinues his emphasis on offering mercy to the Jews, in the main. He does “not spare the natural branches” (Rom 11:21). He breaks them off from their own cultivated olive tree (Rom 11:24) because of their unbelief (Rom 11:20). And he turns his attention to remember mercy to the Gentiles.

***Gentiles Shown Mercy Because of Jewish Disobedience:  
The Present/Future Emphasis***

*“...but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience” (Rom 11:30b)*

The Apostle Paul, being a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and a Pharisee, had been called of God to take his offer of mercy to the Gentiles, as an Apostle to the Gentiles. Yet, while intent on carrying out his God-given mission to the Gentiles, Paul continued to provoke the Jews, his kindred, to jealousy in order that some may repent and be saved (cf. Rom 11:13–14). However, on three momentous occasions, this apostle was met with such stiff Jewish resistance that he announced his intent to turn his focus to the Gentiles more exclusively (cf. Acts 13:46–52; 18:5–11; 28:24–28). As a result, many more Gentiles were saved than Jews, which is true even now.

Paul's concern, as an apostle of Gentiles, is that the Gentiles do not become wise in their own estimation of themselves (Rom 11:25). While this was a special concern in the early church, it is no less a concern today. Gentile rejection of God's mercy continues to accelerate at a rapid pace. The persecution of God's people across God's globe has reached horrid heights and the methods used against God's people are atrocious. Even in “civilized” Europe and America the intellectual persecution from academia is astounding, which makes Paul's admonition to the Corinthians more than relevant today: “God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base

things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God" (1 Cor 1:27–29).

Scriptures tell us that Gentile arrogance will reach its zenith in the last half of the tribulation period when the enemy of Christ, Antichrist, energized by Satan, will seek to destroy God's people. He will especially seek to destroy the nation of Israel and its capital city, Jerusalem. Gentile disobedience will reach its zenith, and instead of attempting to destroy the Messiah this time, Satan will turn his sights to destroy the apple of God's eye, Israel (cf. Zech 2:8), through the ruler he empowers (Rev 13:2).

The record of Holy Scripture is clear, at least to me. Antichrist leads the armies of the earth to battle against Jerusalem (cf. Zech 12:2–3). Behind all this fury, God providentially puts his "fish-hook" into the mouths of these armies and brings them to a divinely appointed place of destruction (cf. Zeph 3:8; Zech 14:2; Joel 3:9–11, 14). Yet, it even seems as if the gathered armies of Antichrist are winning. Zechariah records: "For I will gather all the nations against Jerusalem to battle, and the city will be captured, the houses plundered, the women ravished and half of the city exiled, but the rest of the people will not be cut off from the city" (Zech 14:1–2).

According to Zechariah, Antichrist's forces will be capturing the city of Jerusalem, pillaging and raping it. The world will be on the brink of endless darkness. But it is as dark as it is going to get at this point—for the light of dawn is at hand.

***And So All Israel Will Be Saved:  
The Future Emphasis***

*"They also now may be shown mercy" (Romans 11:31b; cf. v. 26)*

God's mercy is now ready to return to Israel. He will rescue Israel from their plight of disobedience. Just as the Old Testament prophets envisioned. Israel will be rescued when the Deliverer comes from Zion (Rom 11:26).<sup>84</sup> It is at this time the Deliverer "will remove ungodliness from Jacob" (Rom 11:26). Isaiah describes it this way: "A Redeemer will come to Zion and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," declares the Lord" (Isa 59:20). Zechariah 12:10–13:1 paints an amazing picture of this scene. At the height of darkness, Jesus returns to save "all Israel":

I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem,

---

<sup>84</sup>A reference to the Heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22). However, Paul quotes from Isaiah 59:20 which indicates that the Deliverer ("Redeemer," NASU) will come to Zion. Thus he will come from Zion to Zion. Cf. Craig A. Evans, "Paul and the Prophets: Prophetic Criticism in the Epistle to the Romans (with special reference to Romans 9–11)," in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 127.

the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn. In that day there will be great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the plain of Megiddo. The land will mourn, every family by itself; the family of the house of David by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself and their wives by themselves; the family of the Shimeites by itself and their wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself and their wives by themselves. In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.

The Old Testament prophets are astounded by this truth, which causes Isaiah to exult: “Who has heard such a thing? Who has seen such things? Can a land be born in one day? Can a nation be brought forth all at once? As soon as Zion travailed, she also brought forth her sons. Shall I bring to the point of birth and not give delivery?’ Says the Lord. ‘Or shall I who gives delivery shut the womb?’ Says your God” (Isa 66:8–9).

Indeed, all Israel is saved on the day Messiah storms from heavenly Zion to earthly Zion to deliver Jacob from its ungodliness. God has made a covenant with the root of the olive tree to do this (Rom 11:27). This covenant is mentioned again and again in the Old Testament, Jeremiah 31:31–34 arguably being the clearest revealer of this covenant:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

Yet, Israel at this time must remember that God is having mercy on them only “for the sake of the fathers” (Rom 11:28).<sup>85</sup> No one can stop God from doing this. No one, especially Gentiles should even ponder that he will not turn his mercy of salvation to the Jews once again. Indeed, he will. “For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). Paul explicitly tells the Gentiles: “These [Jews] also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you [Gentiles] they [Jews] also now may be shown mercy (Rom 11:31).” In fact, God

---

<sup>85</sup>Cf. Ezekiel 16:60–63. God saves all Israel because of a covenant he made with them “in the days of your youth,” the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

has shut up all in disobedience, both Jews and Gentiles, “so that He may show mercy to all,” (Rom 11:32) both Jews and Gentiles.

Thus, Paul's main point in this passage, including the illustration of the olive tree, is that God is in charge of the historical dispensing of his mercy. And he has dispensed his mercy to the Jew first and then to the Gentile, only to return, in the end, to dispense his mercy to “all Israel.” Gentile arrogance is out of place and abhorrent in this scenario. However, Paul also emphasizes the historical continuity of God's plan to dispense mercy by highlighting the root of the olive tree.

#### **A WORD ABOUT CONTINUITY IN THE OLIVE TREE ANALOGY**

There is only one channel of God's mercy. And it comes through a Jewish root, found in a Jewish person—the Seed of Abraham—through whom not only comes Jewish salvation but Gentile salvation as well. God promised Abraham that through his Seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 22:18).<sup>86</sup> As Old Testament revelation progresses the path to this Seed narrows significantly. From Genesis 49:10 we learn that this Jewish Seed will come through Judah. And from 2 Samuel 7:11–16 we learn that this Seed will come through the line of David. Obviously, the genealogical record of this Seed is important in verifying the veracity of God's promise. It is no wonder, then, that Matthew and Luke record genealogies of Jesus that trace his genealogical record through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and David (cf. Matt 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38).

But not only is pedigree important, the work of God's Son, the Seed, is also. Mercy is only available from God, on the basis of what his Son, the Messiah, has done. God's Son was sent from Heaven, born of the virgin Mary in order to die as a substitute for sinners. This, too, had long ago been prophesied in the Old Testament prophets (cf. Isa 53). He died for the sins of Israel. And John tells us that he came to bear the sins of the world (John 1:29). Only through his death and resurrection can one find mercy from God, which is bestowed freely on anyone (Jew or Gentile) who believes the good news about who Jesus is and what he did. As Paul puts it in Romans 10: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in salvation...for whoever [Jew or Gentile] will call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:9–10, 13).

Thus there is major continuity in the receiving of God's mercy. The only way to receive it is to receive the Father's Son as one's own Savior and pledge allegiance to him as Lord. Only ungodly sinners, like Abraham, who believe like Abraham, are justified and thereby become

---

<sup>86</sup>In actuality we could begin tracing the promise of God's mercy from Genesis 3:15, but Paul focuses on the Jewish root of the promise beginning with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Rom 9:7–13). Cf. Philip E. Hughes, “The Olive Tree of Romans XI,” *Evangelical Quarterly* (January 1948): 22–23.

spiritual children of Abraham, whether Jew (natural branches) or Gentile (wild branches).<sup>87</sup> This has been God's plan all along to use Abraham, his friend (Jas 2:23; cf. Isa 41:8), as the root of the olive tree of God's mercy. The Seed comes from Abraham and one must have faith like Abraham's to receive God's mercy.

This plan for salvation excludes all boasting. Not even Abraham could boast (Rom 4:1–3). Indeed as Paul writes: "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor 1:31; cf. Jer 9:23f; 2 Cor 10:17; Rom 3:27–28). Those who understand this are the blessed saved. They have cried out, like the publican, "God be merciful to me the sinner" (Luke 18:13). To be proud of one's position, achievements, anything focusing on self is antithetical to the gospel. Only those who receive God's mercy become the people of God, redeemed through his Son.

### CONCLUSION

Although Paul began his olive tree analogy emphasizing the one historical root from which God dispenses his mercy to both Jew and Gentile (continuity), he mainly emphasized the diverse way in which God dispenses his mercy throughout history (discontinuity), which opens up a future salvation for Israel that is in harmony with Old Testament prophecies.

Who would have thought up a salvation plan like this? Who would have thought that God would have sent his own Son to offer up a sacrifice for the sins of his enemies? Man would never have done this. But God is not like man. God has planned to save some from all eternity through the sacrifice of his Son on their behalf. No wonder Paul concludes his wonderful chapter 11:33–36 with this magnificent praise:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

The only fitting response for the believer, who has received God's mercy, is immediately penned by Paul in Romans 12:1–2:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

May God help us to do just this out of gratitude for his great mercies.

---

<sup>87</sup>Myles M. Bourke, "A Study of the Metaphor of the Olive Tree in Romans XI" (S.T.D., School of Sacred Theology of the Catholic University of America, 1947), 1.