

**God Did Not Reject His People—  
The Identity of Israel in  
Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 11**

**By**

**Alan Gilman**

*Scripture quoted by permission and are from HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®.  
© 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by of Zondervan Publishing House.  
All rights reserved.*

**God Did Not Reject His People—  
The Identity of Israel in Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 11**

**Version 1.0**

**© 2005 Alan Gilman. All rights reserved.**

**TorahBytes Communications  
P.O. Box 447, Stittsville, Ontario, Canada K2S 1A6**

**Web: [www.torahbytes.org](http://www.torahbytes.org)**

**Send comments to: [info@torahbytes.org](mailto:info@torahbytes.org)**

## ***Introduction***

Even a casual reader of the Bible would notice that it is written primarily in a Jewish context. From the call of Abraham to the formation and development of the nation of Israel, it is within the history and struggles of this particular nation that God is revealed.

The New Testament context, like that of the Old Testament, is also a Jewish one. The story is for the most part told within the borders of Israel of the first century, its writers and primary participants were Jewish, and the issues dealt with are within a Jewish framework. Most importantly the New Testament is the fulfillment of Old Testament (and thus Jewish) expectation.

Sadly through the centuries there has been much antagonism between those who base their faith upon the teachings of the New Testament and the Jewish people. One of the reasons for that antagonism is due to a most common interpretation of the New Testament's use of the term Israel.

For much of church history, Christians have thought of true Israel not as the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but rather as limited to the faithful within the nation. In Old Testament days this would include the likes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as others such as Joshua, Ruth, David, Isaiah, and so on. According to this view, the coming of Jesus created the opportunity to be included in this inner circle to non-Jews (also called Gentiles). Since in the New Testament era the term most often used to describe these faithful ones is "the Church," the term Church became synonymous with the term Israel.

The misuse of the term Israel has deeply affected the Church's relationship to the Jewish people or whom some may call physical or natural Israel.

By carefully looking at Paul's use of the term Israel in the eleventh chapter of his letter to the Romans, I believe we will discover that the term Church is not synonymous with Israel. We will see that the New Testament understanding of Israel is consistent with that of the Old Testament. This Israel is rightly understood as the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a covenant people of God, whose promises of spiritual restoration have never been transferred or revoked.

## **The context**

In Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11, Paul focuses on the issue of Israel's relationship with God in his day. Even now there seems to be considerable confusion regarding the meaning of the term "Israel." This confusion is fueled by a comment of Paul in chapter nine:

***...not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. (9:6b)***

This statement is made even though it is regarding Israel that Paul is experiencing "...great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart" (9:2; compare with verses 3 & 4), and that in the next chapter it is for Israel's salvation that he prays (10:1). This begs the question, if Israel is not really Israel, then whom is Paul grieving over and praying for?

Following his discussions of faith and unbelief among Israel and the Gentiles, Paul himself asks an important question regarding God's relationship with Israel at the beginning of chapter 11:

***I ask then: Did God reject his people? (1a)***

We will carefully work through this chapter, for it is necessary to determine who this Israel really is in order to understand what Paul is seeking to convey. Paul emphatically states that Israel is not rejected by God. What he writes in chapter 11 clarifies the identity of Israel effectively.

The question, "Did God reject his people?" immediately follows the closing statement of chapter 10, where Paul quotes the prophet Isaiah:

***And Isaiah boldly says, "I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." (10:21)***

Isaiah speaks of Israel in general terms. He doesn't refer to a part of Israel, but Israel as a whole. According to Isaiah Israel is a "disobedient and obstinate people."

The acceptance-rejection issue that Paul deals with in chapter 10 leads him to ask the question at the beginning of chapter 11. It is that Israel is in a state of being disobedient and obstinate that begs this question. The term "Israel" here must be referring to either those within Israel who have not accepted the Gospel or Israel in general, whose majority did not receive the Gospel message. Paul uses the term "Israel" like this even though in chapter nine he seems to redefine the term "Israel" in such a

way as to exclude the unbelieving majority. As we will see, he is using "Israel" here at the beginning of chapter 11 differently.

His statement in chapter nine (*not all who are descended from Israel are Israel [9:6b]*) is similar to his use of the term "Jew" in chapter two:

***A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. (2:28,29)***

When he writes "a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly," he is not asserting that Jewish people who lack this inner quality are not Jews at all. It is that the true essence of Jewishness is not found in physical descent or outward religious observance, but rather it is found in an inner godliness that is possessed through faith. Another way to express it would be to say that this is what being Jewish is all about. According to Paul, to neglect the inner reality that God calls for is to miss the point of being Jewish.

That Paul is *not* saying that the other, non-believing, Jews are not Jews at all is clarified in the next verse:

***What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. (3:1,2)***

Why would Paul need to write of the advantage of "being a Jew," if he had just established that those who don't possess the inner quality he mentions are not really Jews at all? Paul consistently writes about believing Israel as a group within a group. As we will see, according to Paul, Israel in general at the time of his writing is in a state of disobedience, while there were those, such as Paul himself, who possessed the inner reality he refers to.

## ***God did not reject Israel***

Paul answers his own question of "Did God reject his people?" by declaring, "***By no means!***" (1b)

Whatever else Paul has stated or will state on this subject, he is emphatic that God has not rejected Israel. What we need to know is whether he is referring to the same obstinate people in the Isaiah reference above or whether he redefines the term,

"Israel." While the ninth chapter may seem to support the redefinition position, that conclusion is not consistent with Paul's argument in chapter eleven.

### ***Paul's own identity***

Paul's first reason for his conviction that God has not rejected Israel is...

***I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. (1c)***

According to Paul, one of the reasons for his assertion is that he himself is a bona fide member of Israel. Note that Paul states that he is "a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin." He is not spiritualizing here, even though he uses the concept of a spiritual descent from Abraham in his letter to the Galatians:

***You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:6-29)***

But that is not what he writes in Romans 11. His reference to his relationship to Israel is not only a spiritual one. He is also a natural descendant of Abraham via Abraham's great-grandson Benjamin.

### ***God's prior relationship to literal Israel***

As Paul then repeats that God did not reject his people, he brings out another aspect:

***God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. (2a)***

While we cannot delve into a full discussion concerning the meaning of "foreknew," let it suffice that God's not rejecting Israel is at least partially wrapped up in some sort of prior relationship to them. What we are most interested in determining here is not the mechanics behind such concepts as foreknowledge, but the identity of the people Paul calls "Israel."

### ***The remnant***

The implications of God's direct involvement with Israel is further illustrated through an example from the life of Elijah.

***Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah-- how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your***

***prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me"? And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (2b-4)***

When Elijah thought that he was the only faithful one left among all Israel, God told him that he himself had reserved seven thousand others. It was God who determined that there were always some in the nation of Israel who remained true to him.

Paul compares the situation of his own day to that of Elijah's:

***So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. (5,6)***

Paul calls the concept of a minority of faithful ones within the whole nation as the "remnant." According to Paul the existence of this remnant in his day precludes the notion that God has rejected Israel. No different from Elijah's day, there are still those within the nation, however small a minority, who are true to God. The existence of the remnant is a sign of God's not rejecting the nation – and especially so since the remnant exists due to God's own decision, instead of the result of human achievement.

Some may think that the remnant is equivalent to Israel. But if that is the case, then there is hardly the need for much of what Paul discusses in chapter 11. If all Israel is not Israel in the way some people understand Paul's statement in chapter nine, then the obstinate nation of chapter 10 isn't really Israel at all. The answer to the question "Did God reject his people?" would be answered by either fully redefining the term "Israel" or equating it with the remnant, but Paul does neither.

That the term Israel is in no way understood as being equivalent to the remnant is made clear as Paul continues.

***What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." (7-10)***

Paul contrasts Israel—a nation who did not obtain favor with God—with the group he calls, "the elect," who is the same as the remnant.

Paul writes that Israel—not part of Israel – but Israel at least in a general sense sought after the favor of God, but did not obtain it unlike the elect. Note that Paul does not say that the ones who were hardened are not really Israel, while the elect are Israel. The elect is a subset of the larger group. While on one hand, as in the quote from Isaiah, Israel is obstinate and disobedient, on the other hand they have not been rejected. The existence of the elect is proof of that.

Note that the only people being discussed here are Israel, both the disobedient nation and the remnant among them. There is no reference so far to Gentiles, either believers or non-believers. The Gentiles are not yet mentioned, because the issue at hand is whether or not God has rejected Israel, the natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Gentiles will come into play shortly when Paul discusses an important relational issue between them and Israel.

### ***The significance of Israel's failure***

Paul then asks another rhetorical question:

***Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? (11a)***

This time he describes Israel's condition as one of stumbling. The logical question to ask then is whether or not that state is permanent. The "they" here cannot be the remnant within Israel, since obviously they have not stumbled. He is referring to Israel in general, which, even though it includes a believing remnant, is described as having stumbled.

Paul again answers his own question:

***Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. (11b)***

Paul flatly denies that Israel will remain in this stumbled condition. As he begins to describe what will happen to Israel, note how he now shifts from discussing Israel and the remnant to the relationship of Israel and the Gentiles. As he does the true identity of who "Israel" really is becomes even more clear. Note that at times when he refers to Gentiles, he seems to be meaning Gentiles in general – believers and non-believers, and other times only Gentile believers.

Paul calls Israel's refusal to accept God's salvation through the Gospel a transgression. Yet this transgression became the basis of the opportunity for that same Gospel to be brought to the other people groups of the world. The receiving of the Gospel on the part of the Gentiles was then to have a rebound effect upon Israel.

God's salvation coming to the Gentiles has either the purpose or the result of causing Israel to become envious. If this is a purpose statement, then God intended to make Israel jealous by salvation coming to the Gentiles, which means their transgression is a part of God's plan. If it is simply a result statement, then Paul is commenting on a reasonable reaction on the part of Israel. In either case the Israel referred to must be the same Israel that had not accepted God's salvation, otherwise there would be no reason for their envious response.

### ***Israel's eventual acceptance***

That this Israel would at some point have a change of heart is inevitable to Paul.

***But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring! (12)***

Paul again refers to Israel's transgression and also uses the word "loss" to describe their rejection of the Gospel. Both their transgression and loss have had a great positive effect upon those whom he calls "the world" or the Gentiles. Israel's rejection of the Gospel opened the way for people of the other nations of the world to receive salvation.

But Paul anticipates, with respect to the Gospel, that the current state that Israel is in is only temporary. At some point Israel will experience what he calls "their fullness." This fullness will result in something even greater than what the Gentiles are experiencing now.

He elaborates:

***I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (13-15)***

The Gentiles whom Paul is addressing here are obviously believers. He affirms that his primary ministry as an apostle is to non-Israelites, and he speaks about his ministry in the way he does in hope that he may arouse his own people to jealousy. Note that in this context "my own people" must be non-believers—the same people he has been calling Israel. Whom else would he be wanting to provoke in this way?

His earnestness here is in anticipation of the great impact his own people's acceptance will have. Some may think that Paul's references to rejection and acceptance

here have to do with God's acceptance and rejection of Israel rather than Israel's rejection and acceptance of the Gospel. It must be the latter, since Paul has clearly stated that God has *not rejected* his people at the beginning of chapter 11.

The eventual acceptance of salvation by Israel will result in what Paul calls "life from the dead." It is clear that this is what Paul envisions as the result of Israel's acceptance of the Gospel, since it is compared to the result of their rejection of it. Just as their rejection of the Gospel brought benefit to the Gentiles, so their acceptance of it will be "life from the dead."

It is not clear what Paul means by "life from the dead." It could be that he is saying that Israel's acceptance of God's salvation through the Gospel will be as if they themselves are coming back to life. If that is the case, then the salvation of Israel is "greater riches," than is the Gospel coming to the nations.

It is more probable that Paul is claiming that Israel's eventual acceptance of the Gospel will have a greater effect upon the world than their rejection of the Gospel had. "Life from the dead" may then be literal: referring to the resurrection of the dead, or figurative: life on earth itself may be lifted to a higher spiritual plain. Maybe it will be a mixture of both.

In any case Paul anticipates that the same Israel whom Isaiah calls "obstinate and disobedient" will not always be that way. Israel, most of whom have rejected the Gospel, will one day accept it with dramatic effects upon the whole world.

It is important to restate that Paul is referring to Israel in a general sense and discussing God's relationship to Israel as a whole. In order to provide his readers with a correct perspective, Paul explains that the general state of Israel at the time he wrote this letter is not the whole story. As we will see shortly, his objective is to help the Gentile believers understand God's intent toward the people of Israel in a day when the majority within Israel were antagonistic toward the Gospel.

### ***Israel's origins***

*If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; (16a)*

At first glance it might appear that Paul is continuing his discussion of the remnant. While he does again appeal to the presence of a faithful minority within the larger group as a reason for his assertion that God has not rejected Israel, we will see he now turns his attention to the origins of the nation.

Paul refers to the custom of firstfruits. This may be the firstfruits of the harvest, when the people of Israel were to give to God the initial gathering of grain in order to sanctify the entire harvest, or more likely he is referring to the custom of when a new batch of dough was made, a small portion would be thrown into the fire as an offering to God. The offering of the small portion set apart the whole batch of dough to God. Either way it refers to the consecration of an entire thing through the offering of an initial portion.

Even though the concept of the remnant seems to apply to this illustration, and there is a New Testament reference to current day believers as a sort of firstfruits (see 2 Thessalonians 2:13; James 1:18), the following illustration which is given in parallel to the firstfruits reference highly suggests that he is referring to the original faithful followers—the Patriarchs—from whom the nation was derived.

### ***The basis of inclusion***

***if the root is holy, so are the branches. (16)***

Paul moves from an illustration based on a religious custom to one based on an agricultural principle. He spends considerable time on the illustration of an olive tree, where he claims that the quality of the root has a sanctifying effect upon the whole tree.

We see then how the giving of the small initial portion of dough sets apart the whole batch, and the quality of the roots affects the quality of the entire tree. It is difficult for some to understand how anyone can be considered holy, unless they are technically saved (made right with God). But Paul uses holy here in a similar way to how he does in 1 Corinthians 7:14, where he states that a believing husband or wife sanctifies (makes holy) their respective spouse and children. Certainly this doesn't mean that the unbelieving spouse or unbelieving children of believers are automatically saved. While it may be difficult to be certain as to the exact nature of sanctification in this context, the relationship these spouses or children have to God is very different from that of a spouse or child of an unbeliever.

One aspect of this relationship to God is that the presence of a believer in a family to some extent causes the entire family to be made part of the plans and purposes of God. If God is now involved in the affairs of the believer, then those closest to that person will, of course, be affected.

In the same way the beginnings of Israel places the entire nation on a special course. The current, general unbelieving state of the nation in general does not alter this.

While the two figures of the dough and the tree are very similar in that they both emphasize that the first part has a profound and lasting effect on the rest, the figure of the tree introduces the additional concept of dependency, which will be significant as Paul discusses who fully participates in the life of the tree. The faith of individuals plays a crucial role here as does in the first eight chapters of this Letter to the Romans.

Before explaining the dynamics of faith in relation to the olive tree, Paul again addresses the Gentile believers:

***If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. (17,18)***

In this illustration there are two kinds of branches, natural and wild. Some of the natural branches were broken off, while some wild ones have been grafted in among the remaining natural ones. The Gentiles believers, as Paul states, are the wild branches. They, now along with the remaining natural branches, share in the nourishment provided by the tree's root.

Paul's admonition to the Gentile believers is that they should not boast over the natural branches. Paul does not explicitly state whether the object of the Gentiles' potential boasting is the natural branches that have been broken off (unbelieving Jews) or the remaining ones (believing Jews) or both. It is more probable that Paul is referring to the believing ones for the following reasons. First, the immediate preceding reference to the natural branches are to the remaining ones: *you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others*. Second, due to the religious and cultural norms of the day, it is more likely that Gentile believers would have significantly more contact with Jewish believers than non-believers. Third, this negative attitude would result in serious problems within the community of believers itself. If the Gentiles would ever think that God was preferring them over and against the people of Israel—in spite of the continued presence of the remnant and the fact of God's original favor toward the patriarchs—it would work against the very plans and purposes of God for both Israel and the Gentiles both in Paul's day and in the future.

The olive tree illustration reminds us that the experience of salvation being enjoyed by the many Gentiles of Paul's day is part of the plan of God that began with his call of Abraham.

But Paul anticipates a retort on the part of the Gentile believers. He anticipates that all he has explained thus far may not be sufficient to prevent their boasting.

***You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." (19)***

Paul understands the logic found in the reasoning that since Israel's rejection of the Gospel was the basis of the Gentiles' opportunity to receive salvation, God must have cast Israel off in favor of the Gentiles.

While Paul accepts as valid the claim that some of Israel was "broken off," and that this breaking off is related to the Gentiles' inclusion, he notes that to be arrogant is the wrong response. He continues,

***Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. (20-22)***

The breaking away of some of the natural branches should give rise to fear, not arrogance, on the part of the Gentile believers. Instead of boasting that God is preferring the Gentiles over the Jews, the Gentile believers should recognize that their inclusion is only because of faith. This refers back to all of what Paul explained in the first eight chapters of Romans: no one has any right to boast with regard to salvation:

***Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. (3:27)***

The basis of inclusion into God's plan of salvation is faith in what God has done, rather than upon anything we ourselves have accomplished. The breaking off of the natural branches was due to their unbelief, while the Gentiles' inclusion was due to their faith. Therefore their proper attitude should be one of fear, not arrogance. Paul seems to be saying that the Gentile believers are in some sense in no better position than the people of Israel in that they are not to take God's favor for granted. Since there was nothing about Israel's status as the natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that guaranteed their remaining in the olive tree, the current inclusion of Gentiles guarantees nothing should they themselves fall into boastful arrogance.

Paul then states that the current unbelieving condition affecting the majority of Israel is not necessarily permanent.

***And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree! (23,24)***

Since faith is the criteria for inclusion, should there be a change of heart on the part of Israel, they will be instantly re-included in God's community of salvation. In fact because of their original relationship to the olive tree, it is fitting that they should be restored. This is contrary to any notion that Israel, because of their unbelief, has lost all rights to their place in God's plan of salvation. If God can include Gentiles, he can certainly re-include the people of Israel.

### ***Israel's on-going relationship to the plan of God***

Note that the olive tree, which Gentile believers are now a part of, is still the olive tree of the natural branches. Paul calls it, "their own olive tree." That a majority of the nation is no longer receiving the nourishment of the tree does not change their special claim upon it.

Not only does their special relationship to the tree remain, Paul anticipates a re-inclusion. He urges the Gentile believers to understand this, in order to prevent them from becoming conceited.

***I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: (25a)***

Paul wants to let the Gentile believers in on what he calls, "a mystery." When Paul uses the term, "mystery," it is in the sense of something of God's plans and purposes that to some extent had not been made fully known, but now was being revealed. It is not that nothing of this "mystery" had ever been known, but that its full understanding or implications had not yet been fully understood.

The mystery is...

***Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. (25b)***

The current state of Israel, whereby the majority have rejected the Gospel, is both partial and temporary. Paul has already explained how there are those like him within Israel who have accepted God's salvation. As for the others, they were hardened. This

hardening will last only until the time when, in the words of the translation used here, "the full number of the Gentiles has come in." Literally this is the more ambiguous: "the fullness of the Gentiles." It is a matter of interpretation whether the fullness refers to numbers or quality. Either the hardness that has affected a part of Israel will last until all the Gentiles who will become believers do so, or it will be until the Gentile believers in general come to some sort of spiritual maturity. Maybe it is a combination of both.

Regardless of what the fullness actually is in this context, it is clear that the experience of hardness on the part of Israel is temporary.

That the term "Israel" refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob hardly needs explanation. There is certainly no sense here of an Israel synonymous with "believers." If that were the case, the reference to hardness would make no sense.

***And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (26,27)***

Far from any notion that God has rejected Israel, all Israel will be saved. In spite of the fact that the majority of the nation was currently in a state of disobedience, they are destined for salvation.

There is no sense whatsoever that Paul is conceiving of an Israel, which is made up of the whole people of God, including both believing Jews and Gentiles. Any thought of that disregards the entire flow of discussion in this chapter as well as the immediate context.

He backs up his conclusion by alluding to Isaiah 59:20, 21, the context of which declares that God promised to send a deliver to save his rebellious people. The same people who were described as obstinate and disobedient at the end of Romans 10, are the objects of this deliverance. It is not coincidental that Paul chose a passage that refers to these people as "Jacob." Using "Jacob" undermines any notion of a spiritual Israel. Referring to Jacob looks back to this patriarch's unbelieving past, prior to his life-changing encounter with God, when his name was changed to Israel (see Genesis 32:24-30). Just as God set his love upon this self-seeking, deceiving striver, so his heart is still for Jacob's descendants. This is the nation in Paul's mind.

Paul seems to anticipate that the Gentile believers might have difficulty with this. He writes,

***As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; (28a)***

The book of Acts demonstrates how the Jewish religious leaders were the prime agitators as Paul and others sought to spread the Good News. But Paul explains that their animosity is the very thing that God is using to help bring the message to the Gentiles. While from the perspective of Gospel preaching they are the antagonists or, to use a stronger word, enemies, their role actually benefited the Gentiles.

From the perspective of the Gentile believers, it would be difficult to understand how these people could have any continuing part to play in God's plans. But that does not take into account God's overall purposes. As Paul continues,

***but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. (28b,29)***

Israel, according to Paul, continues to have a special role in the plans and purposes of God, because of God's prior relationship with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The term "patriarchs" may also include the likes of Moses, David, etc. Paul's conviction that Israel would always be an object of God's love is based upon his understanding of God's own commitment to those with whom he is in covenant. God's choosing of Israel as his instrument of blessing to the world (Genesis 12:3) is irrevocable.

### ***The mercy of God for all***

Paul brings his discussion to a close by musing over how God has worked out the bringing of his mercy to people, using everyone's disobedience as the opportunity to show mercy to all.

***Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. (30-32)***

Because of the disobedience of Israel, the mercy of God has come to the Gentiles, who themselves had been in a state of disobedience to God. Israel's disobedience is therefore the opportunity for Israel themselves to now receive God's mercy through the Gentiles.

This is in keeping with all Paul discussed from the beginning of Romans. No group of people can boast of achieving salvation. Salvation comes to all as a result of

God's mercy, shown to us through others, who themselves are recipients of that mercy.

The thought of all this leads Paul to explode in praise to God, who is the source, channel, and object of all things, whose wisdom and knowledge is far beyond anything we can ever comprehend.

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (33-36)*

## **Conclusion**

We have seen how Paul uses the term, "Israel." Even though his reference to "...not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" in chapter nine may give the impression that he redefines the term, he does nothing of the sort. His meaning of "Israel" must be understood within each context Paul uses it.

Paul clearly states that, "God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew" (2a). Because the majority of the people of Israel were not receiving the Gospel message, some may think that God was now favoring the Gentiles over the Jews. This is not the case, since even though they were in the minority, there were many, like Paul himself, who were natural descendants of Israel. This faithful minority within the nation of Israel comprised what Paul calls the "remnant" and was similar to the faithful Israelites of the prophet Elijah's day. Additionally, God's ongoing commitment to Israel is also based on his enduring promise to the patriarchs.

There is no hint in what Paul writes in Romans 11 of the term "Israel" meaning anything but the natural descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact Paul goes to great lengths to explain that the very same nation who were, generally speaking at that time, disobedient to God would one day as a nation be restored to right relationship with God, just as God had promised in the Old Testament.