

*The following posts by Jason Staples, published on [The Bart Ehrman Blog](#), connected with Jason's dissertation and now published book on what Paul meant that "All Israel will be saved."

Post 1: What Does Paul Mean By 'All Israel Will All Israel Be Saved'?

A few questions have come in about the apostle Paul's views on the ultimate fate of Israel, a subject he covers primarily in chapters 9–11 of Romans, where his argument climaxes with the following two verses:

"For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, lest you yourselves become high-minded, that an insensibility has come upon Israel for awhile until the fullness of the nations has entered—and thus all Israel will be saved, just as it is written...." ([Rom 11:25–26a](#))

If you've found yourself puzzled when reading this section of Romans, you're in good company—it's among the most complex and difficult sections in the New Testament, and scholars have argued about these chapters for centuries. Third-century church father Origen got so exasperated with this passage that his commentary states, "Who the 'all Israel' are who will be saved ... only God knows, along with his only begotten and perhaps any who are his friends." A few modern scholars have simply given up the attempt to resolve the tension, concluding that Paul was simply inconsistent, giving different (ultimately contradictory) answers to different questions. That alone should tell you how deep the water is here—enter at your own risk!

The primary problem is that Paul—the self-proclaimed "apostle of gentiles"—has just spent the bulk of Romans arguing there is no distinction between Jews and gentiles with respect to salvation (e.g., [Rom 3:21–30](#)) and elsewhere proclaims that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek" ([Galatians 3:28](#)). How can he claim that Jews and gentiles stand equal before God while simultaneously defending Israel's special status? It all seems terribly contradictory. But it's even worse than that: Paul not only claims both things but insists they're tied together, arguing that "all Israel will be saved" only when "the fullness of the nations has entered [into what?!?]." The closer one looks, the more complex things seem. To figure out what Paul means here, at a minimum one has to answer four questions:

- (1) What does "the fullness of the nations" mean? (Note: the Greek word for "nations" can also be translated "gentiles" or "non-Jews.")
- (2) What is the "fullness of the nations" entering?
- (3) How is the ingathering of the "fullness of the nations" related to the the salvation of Israel? (Note: The Greek phrase underlying "and thus" represents a logical relationship between two things. For example, "He brought sandwiches, and thus they were able to eat.")
- (4) What does "all Israel" mean?

As early as the second century, some Christian interpreters cut this Gordian knot by claiming that the Christian church is the "true Israel." One early second century writer, for example, argues that the Israelite covenant "is ours [Christians], but they [Jews] lost it forever" (Epistle of Barnabas 4:7). In this view, often called "replacement theology," the "fullness of the nations" simply refers to all the gentiles who ultimately come into the church, which what Paul means by "all Israel." This perspective is

therefore able to answer all four questions, but it does so by radically redefining Israel. These things are therefore tied together because Paul isn't really talking about the same Israel he was before.

Many modern scholars have found such a radical redefinition of Israel implausible, especially since all the other uses of "Israel" in Romans 9–11 refer to the historical ethnic group. The "replacement" model also seems to work against the whole point of this section of Romans. In these chapters, Paul is explaining how gentile inclusion does not threaten Israel's salvation but actually proves God's faithfulness to Israel. But how is that true if he concludes that historical Israel has simply been replaced by a new group by the same name? That would be like telling parents that they needn't worry about their child's safety because a substitute child with the same name can easily be provided. Such a conclusion would confirm exactly what Paul is trying to argue against!

Consequently, this "replacement" or "supersessionist" view is no longer as popular as it once was and is now only one of four major views held by scholars today. The other three options all agree that when Paul says "Israel," he means the ethnic group historically referred to by that term. The differences between these views have to do with exactly who is included in that group—that is, what Paul means by "all"—and the manner and timing of Israel's salvation.

Some scholars argue that both the "all" and "Israel" must be taken at face value and therefore argue that Paul means every individual Jew throughout history will ultimately be saved by virtue of membership in the covenantal people of God. In this view, Jews do not need to receive the gospel or follow Jesus—that's a separate path to salvation for gentiles, not Jews. The problem is that this "two-covenant" view has a very difficult time accounting for questions (2) and (3). What are the gentiles gathered into? And if Jews will be saved regardless of the gospel, why does Paul suggest that their salvation is somehow related to the ingathering of gentiles? It's also hard to explain why Paul's statements of grief about his fellow Jews who have rejected the gospel (such as at the beginning of chapter 9) if they're going to be saved either way.

A few scholars have argued that "all Israel" refers not to all Jews throughout history but only to all elect Jews (that is, those Jews God chooses to save) throughout history, those who will be saved through Christ. This view can explain Paul's grief, but it has its own problems, starting with the inability to explain why Paul says "all Israel" when he really means "some Jews." Had Paul meant "elect Jews," he could have saved his interpreters the trouble by simply saying that. This view also makes the climax of Paul's argument into a mere truism, effectively, "God will save everyone God will save," and it doesn't have much better answers for (2) and (3) than the "two covenant" view does.

The fourth view is that Paul is envisioning the miraculous end-times salvation of all Jews alive at that time. After all the elect gentiles ("the fullness of the nations") have been saved, all Jews alive at that time will be saved at once, presumably through a mass conversion to Christ. This view therefore answers (3) by reading "and thus" as denoting temporal sequence ("and then"). This is probably the most widely held view among critical scholars today, but it is not without its weaknesses. First of all, "all Israel" is limited to all Jews alive at the end, so most Jews throughout history aren't included. Most interpreters explain this by observing that Paul expected this to happen in his own day and wasn't anticipating centuries between himself and Christ's return. The second problem is more significant, as this view has difficulty explaining question (2): what is the "fullness of the nations" entering? Paul doesn't say "all Israel" will be saved after the salvation of the gentiles but after the gentiles have "come in." Into what, exactly?

But it's the third problem that is most serious for this view: even if Paul's "Israel" refers to the ethnic group traditionally associated with that name, why should we assume "Israel" is synonymous with "the Jews"? At first this may seem like a strange question to ask. I mean, isn't it obvious that Israel refers to the Jews? Actually, no. Our first hint that the two terms aren't synonymous is provided by the fact that Paul suddenly switches to "Israel" terminology in Romans 9–11 after referring to "Jews" nine times in the earlier chapters of Romans. In fact, Paul doesn't use the term "Israel" very often elsewhere; that term appears over twice as many times (13) in Romans 9–11 as it does elsewhere in the seven letters scholars agree he wrote (6 times). Everywhere else Paul talks about his contemporary kinspeople, he uses the word "Jew" (26 times). If Paul meant "Jews," why did he switch terms? Clearly, something is going on here!

These questions are not only important for this passage; they're central to understanding Paul's larger message. If we can't explain how he envisions Israel's salvation, how can we understand what he means by salvation in general? In my next posts, we'll take a closer look at why Paul switches terms and what that suggests about how we should interpret this difficult passage.

Post 2: Why Does Paul Switch from Talking about 'Jews' to 'Israel'?

My last post looked at how Paul's statements about Israel's ultimate salvation in Romans 11 seem to contradict what he says elsewhere about the equality between Jews and gentiles (non-Jews) and surveyed several ways scholars have tried to reconcile that tension. But that post concluded by calling attention to a significant but often unnoticed problem: most modern scholars have simply assumed that "Israel" means "Jews." But if Paul meant "Jews," why didn't he just use that term like he does in the rest of Romans and his other letters? Why does he switch terms for three chapters in Romans 9–11? The very fact that he changes terminology suggests something subtle is afoot, so if we're going to understand what Paul's doing here, we have to be able to explain why he shifts to talking about "Israel" in the first place.

To answer this question, we need to step back a bit to look at how the term "Israel" was understood and used by Paul's contemporaries. Surprisingly, it turns out that other first-century Jews also distinguish between "Israelites" and "Jews." One good example is Josephus, a first-century Jewish priest who wrote a history of the Jewish people (*Jewish Antiquities*). Josephus stops using the term "Israel" around the midpoint of his history, at which point he begins using the term "Jew," which is much rarer in the first half where Israel appears.

Interestingly, unlike Paul, Josephus actually explains why he switches terms, saying that although many Jews returned from the Babylonian Exile, "the whole of Israel remained in that land [of exile], so it came about that only two tribes returned to Asia and Europe and are subject to the Romans. But the ten tribes are still beyond the Euphrates River and are a boundless multitude too great to number" (*Antiquities* 11.132). He then explains that "after they [the two tribes] returned from Babylon, they were called Jews after the tribe of Judah, since that was the prominent tribe" (*Jewish Antiquities*, 11.173).

To understand what Josephus is talking about here, we have to take another step back to the story of Israel in the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament), where Israel is the name of the twelve-tribe people of God led out of Egypt in the exodus that eventually becomes a unified kingdom under David, who was

from the tribe of Judah. But the unity among these twelve tribes is fleeting, as the ten northern tribes broke off to form their own kingdom after the death of David's son, Solomon. The result was two kingdoms: the northern kingdom, which retained the name "Israel," and the southern kingdom of Judah, which was ruled by David's descendants. The odd result of this is that "Israel" could refer either to the whole twelve-tribe people of God (that is, "all Israel") or the ten-tribe kingdom to the north of Judah.

The northern kingdom was actually the stronger and more prosperous of the two, but it also drew the attention of the Neo-Assyrian Empire because of its strategic importance along an important trade route connecting Mesopotamia and Egypt. After a few ill-advised attempts to shake off Assyrian control in the mid-eighth century BCE, the northern kingdom finally came to an end when the Assyrians sacked the capital city of Samaria in around 722 BCE and converted the territory into an Assyrian province.

The Assyrians were experts at breaking up rebellious people groups; their primary strategy was to deport much of the population, dispersing them among different regions of the Assyrian empire, ensuring that they were spread too thin to unify and rebel again. And within a few generations, these dispersed groups would typically intermarry among the other people groups in those areas, effectively losing their distinct ethnic identity and becoming melting-pot Assyrians. (Such practices are considered genocide by today's standards.) This is ultimately what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel, as Assyria deported large portions of the population, scattering them into separate areas. (For a theologically-charged and hyperbolic account of these deportations, see 2 Kings 17.)

Many from the north fled south during these events, but only twenty years later, King Hezekiah of Judah foolishly repeated the mistakes of the northern kings and rebelled against Assyria. According to the records of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, this resulted in the deportations of over 200,000 people from Hezekiah's kingdom—including many refugees who had fled from the north. Interestingly, Sennacherib did not depose Hezekiah himself (there's some evidence that suggests Sennacherib's mother was closely related to Hezekiah), and Judah remained a distinct kingdom, though effectively reduced to the territory immediately around Jerusalem, for a few more generations. A little over a century later (587/6 BCE), the Babylonians finally brought the kingdom of Judah to an end, famously destroying Jerusalem, burning the Temple of YHWH (the God of Israel), and deporting those of consequence to Babylon.

While all this was happening, a series of prophets engaged in withering critiques of Israelite and Judahite society, proclaiming that YHWH would destroy both kingdoms and scatter his people because of persistent injustice and idolatry, each of which represented a breach of contract with YHWH. But that's not all these prophets proclaimed; the final versions of these prophetic books also promise that YHWH would ultimately restore his people from their scattered state after they learned their lesson. Remarkably, these prophecies often emphasized that this return would include a reunification of Israel and Judah (for examples, see Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36–37). This expectation of the reconstitution and restoration of all twelve tribes of Israel became an important part of Jewish theology thereafter.

This brings us back to the events Josephus is talking about in the passages cited above. Babylon was soon conquered by the Persians, who presented themselves as liberators to those who had been oppressed by the Assyrians and Babylonians. As part of this policy of liberation, many from Judah who had been exiled to Babylon (or their descendants) were allowed to return to their homeland once again. Prophecy fulfilled, right! Well, not quite. Don't forget that many of the prophecies about Israel's restoration go out of their way to include not only those from Judah but also from the northern tribes of Israel.

That's ultimately what Josephus is referring to—he explicitly says that only those from Judah returned while the rest of Israel remained on the other side of the Euphrates, still awaiting the promised return and reunification of all Israel. Josephus explains that this is why he stops saying “Israel” and starts talking about “Jews”: after the return from Babylon, the lens has narrowed from Israel as a whole to those from the southern kingdom of Judah. For Josephus, at least, “Israel” is not synonymous with the Jews. Instead, Israel is a larger group that includes but is not limited to Jews, much like “American” includes but is not limited to New Yorkers.

I won't belabor the point here—I did plenty of that in my book *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, which comes out later this year—but a closer look at other sources from the period shows that Josephus' distinction between these terms was pretty typical in this time period. There's also a lot of concern about exactly where the other ten tribes are (our best evidence is that most of the tribes like Reuben and Naphtali simply intermarried and disappeared), and the Samaritans claim to be descendants of some of the northern tribes. Most Jews seem to have rejected that claim to Israelite status as illegitimate, viewing Samaritans as the result of intermarriage between the people Assyria resettled within the land and the Israelites left behind. (Note, however, that neither Jews nor Samaritans view the Samaritans as Jews—the debate is over Israelite status, not Jewish status.)

Once we recognize this distinction, a few other things get clearer, starting with the historical Jesus himself. Take note that Jesus proclaimed the coming of the “kingdom of God” and chose twelve apostles, who he promised would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” ([Matt 19:28](#) // [Luke 22:30](#)). But there were no twelve tribes in Jesus' day! The point of this promise was that Jesus himself was initiating the long-awaited restoration of all twelve tribes—they may not be here yet, but they will be! The “kingdom of God” would be the restored Israel of the prophets, through which God himself would bring justice to all the nations. This was the radical apocalyptic message Jesus went to the cross proclaiming and attempting to initiate.

Of course, that raises an obvious question for those around after Jesus' crucifixion: did Jesus fail? Where is Israel's restoration? Why haven't the twelve tribes returned? And if you're Paul, you're also left trying to explain why all these gentiles are responding to the gospel message—which, remember, is about Israel's messiah-king and the restoration of Israel! Has God simply abandoned Israel and elected a new people from the nations? This is precisely the question Paul is trying to answer in Romans 9–11, and in answering it, he returns to the question of exactly who constitutes Israel in the first place. And as it turns out, he argues that because “Israel” is something bigger than the Jews alone, the salvation of “all Israel” will require something bigger, something miraculous. Paul's solution will be the subject of my next post.

Post 3: Did Jesus Fail to Restore Israel? Paul's Solution to the Problem

The two previous posts have discussed why scholars have found Paul's statements about Israel's ultimate salvation difficult to square with his insistence on the equal status of gentile believers in Jesus and why we can't just assume that “Israel” is synonymous with “the Jews.” Now it's time to tie it all together and explain what Paul's actually doing in this passage. As a reminder, we left off talking about Jesus' proclamation of the “good news” that he was setting in motion the restoration of all twelve tribes of Israel—and everything that goes with that.

His followers would certainly have expected his crucifixion to be followed closely by the restoration he promised, including the reunification of the Jews and the ten northern tribes of Israel (who are not Jewish, since they're not from Judah) into a single kingdom, through which God would bring justice to the world. When this didn't seem to be happening, they had to explain why. Had Jesus failed? Was he not who he claimed to be? When would Israel be restored?

To see just how foundational this question was for the earliest Christians, take note of how the book of Acts begins: after the resurrection, Jesus gathers his faithful followers together, where they asked him, "Lord, is now the time you restore the kingdom to Israel?" ([Acts 1:6](#)). This verse serves as the thesis question for the book of Acts, which then attempts to explain why the restoration of Israel seems not to have happened as expected if Jesus were in fact the messiah-king of Israel. Acts' answer is that Israel's restoration is in fact underway—it's just happening in a surprising manner and on a heavenly level rather than an earthly level. It turns out that this solution is remarkably Pauline (not surprising since Paul is the great hero of Acts), as Paul ultimately gives a very similar answer in Romans 9–11.

Remember that Paul is trying to address this question about Israel's restoration. Many scholars have understood chapters 9–11 as Paul's attempt to explain the fact that many Jews have rejected the gospel, but the problem is really bigger than that. He's trying to explain why, if Jesus is in fact Israel's messiah-king, Israel hasn't been restored as expected—and why gentiles are being included in the community instead. Does this mean God has abandoned Israel in favor of a new people? Paul vigorously argues against that conclusion, instead attempting to explain why the inclusion of gentiles actually represents God's faithfulness towards Israel. Obviously, Paul's explanation is complex, and we don't have enough space here get into much detail—for that you'll have to wait for my second book, which should hit the shelves next year at some point. For now, we'll just hit three key points Paul makes in his argument.

The first is in [Romans 9:23–26](#), where Paul explains that God has chosen to show mercy to those he has called, "not only from among Jews but also from among gentiles" (9:24). As proof, he cites a passage from the prophet Hosea, "I will call those who were not my people, 'my people' ... and it shall be that in the place where it was said to them 'you are not my people,' there they will be called children of the living God" ([Rom 9:25–26](#)). There's more going on here than meets the eye.

You'll remember from my last post that, according to the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament), the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed and its people scattered by Assyria. Shortly before that happened, the prophet Hosea had warned that such judgment was coming, declaring that Israel's infidelity had resulted in a divine divorce. "You are not my people," Hosea proclaimed on behalf of Israel's God, "and I am not your God" ([Hos 1:9](#)). Whereas previously Israel's God had provided for them and ensured their safety, he would now cast them among the nations, where they would be "swallowed up" ([Hos 8:8](#)), no different than any other people. Nevertheless, the prophet also promises that God would one day restore those to whom he said "you are not my people," making them his special people once again ([Hos 1:10–11](#)).

These are the verses Paul quotes in Romans 9, but he strangely applies these verses to the gentiles being shown mercy. Is he just ignoring the context to cite something convenient for his argument? That's possible, but I think there's more going on here below the surface. Specifically, Paul has latched onto these verses because of the "not my people" language—after all, gentiles are by definition not God's

people. Further, if Hosea is telling the northern Israelites that they are now “not my people”—that is, outside the special covenant with God—wouldn’t mean that they’ve effectively become gentiles?

Putting the pieces together, Paul appears to read Hosea as a twofold prophecy, each directly involving gentiles or gentile status. First, (northern) Israel would no longer be distinct from the rest of the nations—they’ve effectively become gentiles. (This does seem to be what happened with the northern Israelites who were scattered by Assyria—they intermarried with the other peoples, thus assimilating into those groups and ceasing to be their own separate ethnic group.) But at some later time—and this is the part Paul specifically quotes—God will restore Israel from being “not my people” (gentiles). To put it plainly, much of Israel has “gone native” and become gentiles, so now God is fulfilling his promise to restore Israel by incorporating gentiles.

This brings us back to the two verses that have puzzled so many readers of Paul over the ages:

“For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, lest you yourselves become high-minded, that an insensibility has come upon Israel for awhile until the fullness of the nations has entered—and thus all Israel will be saved, just as it is written....” ([Rom 11:25–26a](#))

In my first post, I explained that any interpretation that aims to explain what Paul’s arguing in these verses needs to answer four questions:

- (1) What does “the fullness of the nations” mean? (Note: the Greek word for “nations” can also be translated “gentiles” or “non-Jews.”)
- (2) What is the “fullness of the nations” entering?
- (3) How is the ingathering of the “fullness of the nations” related to the the salvation of Israel? (Note: The Greek phrase underlying “and thus” represents a logical relationship between two things. For example, “He brought sandwiches, and thus they were able to eat.”)
- (4) What does “all Israel” mean?

It turns out that the key to understanding this passage is recognizing that “all Israel” is neither a way of talking about the gentile church as a substitute for the Jews nor is it synonymous with the Jews. Instead, by “all Israel,” Paul means exactly what that phrase means in his Bible—all twelve tribes of Israel, which includes both Jews (those from Judah) and those from the northern tribes of Israel, who are not from Judah and are therefore not Jews. That is, Paul is talking about the same long-awaited restoration promised by the prophets that Jesus claimed to be inaugurating, a restoration that by definition includes more than Jews.

But Paul argues that since much of Israel had become inextricably assimilated among the nations, the only way for this to happen to is for gentiles to be included among Israel—that’s what the “fullness of the nations” is entering. But what does he mean by “fullness of the nations”? Why use that specific phrase? It turns out that phrase appears in one place in Paul’s Bible: when the patriarch Jacob blessed the two sons of Joseph, he declared a greater blessing over Ephraim (which also became another name for the northern kingdom since Ephraim was the ruling tribe), promising that Ephraim’s “seed [descendants] will become the fullness of the nations” ([Gen 48:19](#)).

Interestingly, most Bible translations—including the Greek Septuagint—conflate the Hebrew phrase with God’s promise to Abraham that his seed would “become a multitude of nations,” but Paul’s phrase is a perfect literal rendering of the distinctive Hebrew phrase, which only appears in [Gen 48:19](#). By echoing this distinctive phrase, Paul effectively argues that the plan of God has been hidden in plain sight (mystery!): northern Israel would become gentile-ified but would then be restored—in the process fulfilling God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s seed.

This reading can therefore satisfactorily answer all four of the above questions. The “fullness of the nations” represents the seed of Ephraim (the northern kingdom) assimilated among the gentiles. It enters and is reincorporated in Israel, and this is the means by which not only the Jews but all Israel will be saved. Thus Paul argues that incorporation of gentiles is a necessary part of Israel’s restoration and is in fact evidence of God’s faithfulness to Israel—God will go as far as incorporating gentiles (!) to essentially resurrect Israel from the dead (see Ezekiel 37; [Rom 11:15](#)).

This reading explains how Paul can insist both on the continued special status of Israel while also emphasizing the equal incorporation of believing gentiles in early Christian communities. It also dispenses with the major weaknesses of the other proposals. Unlike the “replacement” view, Paul has not replaced the “ethnic” understanding of Israel or argued that the gentile church has somehow become a “new Israel.” Instead, the gentiles’ salvation depends on their inclusion in Israel, something that amounts to an ethnic conversion. And unlike the other three common scholarly views, Paul has also not redefined “Israel” to more narrowly refer to Jews only but instead continues to keep the broader emphasis on all twelve tribes.

This understanding of Paul’s view of Israel has many implications about how he understands ethics, the role of the Torah, and many other things, but we’ll have to leave those things until another time. For now, it’s worth taking a moment to admire the elegance and subtlety of Paul’s argument for how Israel is in fact being restored as promised, though it looks different than anyone anticipated.