Christians to Israel?

A group that exists for the sake of ‘Christian Witness to Israel’ faces questions and criticisms directed to it on two fronts, each of which represents a significant challenge to the validity and importance of its reason for existing.¹

On the one hand, there is the position taken by those who deny the continuing theological significance of the category ‘Israel’ this side of Christ, except for its use with reference to the church as the new Israel. Those who view the issue from this vantage-point are generally open, at least in theory, to the idea that there ought to be a continuing Christian effort to evangelise individual Jewish people, and may be prepared to concede the continuing legitimacy of some of their brothers and sisters becoming ‘as a Jew ... to the Jews ... in order to win Jews’ (1 Cor. 9:20), as a matter of evangelistic strategy. But the boldest hopes supported by such a perspective rarely stretch beyond the possibility of the occasional Jewish convert to Christianity, assimilated into the life of a Gentile congregation or perched on its periphery as an exotic anomaly. Nor does this perspective provide much of a basis for placing a high priority on any responsibility that contemporary Christians might have for participating in or supporting Jewish evangelism; after all, the number of Jewish people in the world today is a drop in the bucket compared to the countless millions of Gentiles.

On the other hand, there are the arguments of those who happily grant the continuing theological significance of Israel as the elect people of God, but deny the validity or necessity of any ‘Christian witness’ to them. Many, of course, of those who take this viewpoint do not believe in Jesus as Messiah at all. But alongside them, sharing this opinion, there are also those who grant the legitimacy of Christian faith for Gentiles but insist on a Sonderweg – a separate path, under a different covenant – for Jews, and those who enthusiastically embrace the idea of Messianic Judaism but insist that its stance toward the wider community of Israel should be a ‘postmissionary’ one.

My aim in this article is to lay some of the groundwork for the beginnings of a response to the criticisms that might be directed against the idea of a Christian witness to Israel arising from each of these directions. The scope of the article will be quite narrow: I will be focusing exclusively on Paul’s letters, and on one recurring theme within those letters – the relationship between Jesus, Israel and the promises of God.

A comprehensive New Testament rationale for Christian witness to Israel would of course require much more than that. Within the corpus of Paul’s letters a string of other issues could be investigated, such as his views on election, final judgement, circumcision, ‘Israel’ language, Messiahship, covenant, land and the law. Beyond Paul’s letters, in the rest of the New Testament, there are big and important discussions to be entered into about topics including the portrayal of the Jewish nation and its leaders in John’s gospel, the missions of Jesus and his disciples in the gospel of Matthew, the theology of temple and land in

¹ This article originated as the 2012 Edersheim Lecture, sponsored by Christian Witness to Israel.
Luke/Acts, the identity of the recipients of 1 Peter and the 144,000 in Revelation, and the relationship between old and new covenants in the letter to the Hebrews. And lurking behind and beneath all these questions of New Testament interpretation are the hermeneutical and biblical-theological questions about how the Old Testament should be interpreted – whether, for example, it ought to be read by Christians (exclusively) through a New Testament lens or (also) interpreted independently of and prior to the New Testament.

But for the purposes of this article all of those wider questions will be left for another day and my focus will be narrowly concentrated on one question: how does Paul encourage his readers to understand the implications of the coming of Jesus for the inheritance and fulfilment of the promises of God? My plan will be to deal one by one with the four letters in which Paul makes use of the language of ‘promise’ and ‘promises’, asking in each case what Paul wants his readers to understand about the relationship between Jesus, Israel and the promises of God given in the Old Testament, and the effect that Paul intends this understanding to have in the lives of his readers.

**Galatians 3: Promise, offspring and inheritance**

Within the collection of Paul’s letters, the earliest extended discussion of the promises of God and the people who inherit them is to be found in Galatians 3-4. It comes within the context of an urgent warning to the Gentile churches of Galatia against the teachings of a group of rival teachers who have come among them, urging them to submit to circumcision (6:12) and preaching a message that, in Paul’s eyes, amounts to ‘a different gospel’ from the one the Galatians originally received (1:6).²

Somewhere in the discussion – whether as part of the message of the rival teachers or as part of Paul’s response – the question of how and by whom God’s promised blessings come to be inherited emerged as a key issue of debate. It is likely, though not certain, that the rival teachers’ argument included an appeal to the story of Abraham and the function that circumcision played as a sign of the ‘everlasting covenant’ that God made with him and his offspring (Gen. 17:9-14). If the Galatians are to become proper descendants of Abraham and full inheritors of the promises that God made to him and to his offspring, then – the argument would have been – they need to submit to the sign that was described by God to Abraham as ‘my covenant ... in your flesh’ (Gen. 17:13).³

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² For reasons of space I will be leaving out the brief reference in Tit. 1:2 to ‘the hope of eternal life that God ... promised before the ages began.’

³ We do not have any direct access to the arguments of the rival teachers that had ‘confus[ed]’ and ‘unsettle[d]’ the Galatians (5:10, 12), but it is possible to piece together a tentative account of what it might have been, based on how Paul responds to it. Whilst the amount of energy that Paul expends in chs. 1-2 on defending his character and apostleship would suggest that these were at least called into question by his rivals, they do not appear to have presented themselves as calling for the Galatians to reject everything they had heard from Paul: their appeal seems to have been framed as an encouragement to complete or perfect through circumcision and works of Torah what they had ‘started’ through Paul’s gospel (3:2). Their motivation, according to Paul, included a desire to ‘make a good showing in the flesh’ and avoid persecution for the sake of the cross of Christ (6:12) – presumably by maintaining the sort of connection with the local synagogue that would have shielded Jewish Christians from synagogue discipline and given communities of believers in Jesus a measure of protection under Roman law. But their message (as it was heard and understood by the Galatians) was not just presented as an argument from prudence and pragmatism, or an encouragement toward ethical progress or a deeper experience of the Spirit: some at least among the Galatians had concluded that circumcision and subjection to the law would be necessary for them to obtain and secure a verdict of divine justification (2:21; 4:21; 5:4; cf. Acts 15:1).

⁴ Cf. the reconstruction of their message proposed in Richard N. Longenecker, Galatians (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1990), cxvii.
Whatever place arguments from the scriptural story of Abraham occupied within the message of the teachers in Galatia, they were certainly prominent in Paul’s response. The bulk of Paul’s argument about promise and inheritance is contained within Gal. 3:6-29.\(^5\) Within this section of the letter, Paul offers an account of the overarching narrative of Scripture to serve as an interpretation and confirmation of the argument that he makes in 3:1-5 from the Galatians’ experience of receiving the Spirit.

Paul’s language within these paragraphs oscillates freely between the singular ‘promise’ (vv. 14, 17, 18, 19, 22, 29) and the plural ‘promises’ (vv. 16, 21). Whilst the primary promise in view is the promise of Gen. 12:3 that ‘all the Gentiles shall be blessed in you’ (cf. Gal. 3:8), the plural ‘promises’ in verse 16 suggests that it is not that verse alone which Paul has in mind; this impression is immediately confirmed when Paul goes on to say that the promises were made to Abraham ‘and to his offspring’, quoting this time not from the promise of blessing to the Gentile nations in Gen. 12:3 but from the promise of land in Gen. 13:15 and Gen 17:8. To further complicate the picture, Paul’s argument in 3:6-14 is constructed in a way that draws a close correlation between the restoration promises of the prophets and the original divine promises to Abraham: the outpouring of the Spirit promised by the prophets is understood by Paul to be equivalent to, or at least included within ‘the blessing of Abraham’ (v. 14), and Habbakuk’s promise that ‘the one who is righteous will live by faith’ is placed in parallel with the reckoning of righteousness to believing Abraham (vv. 6, 11).

The ‘promises’ in view within these paragraphs, then, include not only the promise of blessing to the Gentiles but also the promise of the land and the prophetic promises of restoration and the outpouring of the Spirit. All of these promises, it seems, are understood by Paul as constituting a single inheritance, promised by God ‘to Abraham and his offspring ... that is, to one person, Christ’.\(^6\) Furthermore, because the inheritance of the promises belongs to ‘one person ... Christ’ (3:16), it is those ‘in Christ Jesus’ who receive the blessing of Abraham (3:14) – in Christ ‘there is no longer Jew or Greek’ (3:28).

The basic point, therefore, which Paul’s argument in Galatians about promise and inheritance is intended to support is an emphatic assertion of the full inclusion of Gentile believers – apart from the law and irrespective of their uncircumcision – among the justified people of God and the heirs of his promises. All that was promised – blessing, land, life, righteousness, the Spirit – is inherited ‘through faith in Christ Jesus’ and given ‘to those who believe’ (3:22). Stated positively, it is a claim about the justification of uncircumcised, believing Gentiles and their inclusion among the people of God. Stated negatively, it is a strong rejection of any idea that Torah observance or Abrahamic ancestry is a sufficient basis for inheritance of the promises.

2 Corinthians 1:19-20: The ‘yes’ to all God’s promises

If we read Paul’s letters in chronological sequence, the next place within the collection in which we meet the language of ‘promise’ and ‘promises’ is in Second Corinthians. The language of ‘promises’ occurs at two places within the letter and plays a vital part in Paul’s rhetoric on each occasion.

\(^5\) Also relevant is the extended metaphor of slavery, minority and sonship in 4:1-7 which recapitulates the main point of the scriptural arguments in 3:6-29, and the allegory of Hagar and Sarah in 4:21-31, in which the Galatian believers are described as being, like Isaac, ‘children of the promise’ (4:23, 28) and reminded that ‘the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman’ (4:30).

\(^6\) Paul’s claim in 3:16 about the singular seed is not a hermeneutical rabbit pulled out of the hat, but an expression of a traditional Jewish understanding that the messiah fulfills the Abrahamic promise. Cf. 2 Sam. 7, Ps. 72, and the discussion in James M. Scott, Adoption as Sons of God: An Exegetical Investigation into the Background of ΥΙΟΘΕΣΙΑ in the Pauline Corpus (WUNT 2/48; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992), 180-182.
The first occurrence is in 2 Cor. 1:19-20 where Paul (in the context of a defence of his own integrity) reminds the Corinthians that ‘in [the Son of God, Jesus Christ] every one of God’s promises is a “Yes”.’ In doing so, Paul not only points to Jesus Christ as the one in whom all the promises of God (presumably including, among others, the Abrahamic promises, the promises to David and his descendants, and the restoration promises given to exilic and post-exilic Israel) find their divine confirmation; he also offers a hint (confirmed in the immediately following verses) that it is those ‘in Christ’ (whether Jew or Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised) who inherit the promises, so that they become the ‘Amen’ to his ‘Yes’. That this is the case is evidenced, according to Paul, by the ‘seal’ and ‘guarantee’ of the Spirit (v. 20). Thus, as Paul goes on to say later in the letter (in an obvious allusion to the restoration promises of Isaiah): ‘If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation’ (2 Cor. 5:17).

Paul’s assertion in verse 20 is not necessarily intended as a claim that the Christ event, in and of itself, is the total fulfilment of all of the Old Testament promises of God. The ‘yes’ to a promise is not so much its fulfilment as its confirmation – in this case, the answer to an implied question about the willingness or ability of God to bring it to fulfillment. Paul’s intention is to draw an analogy between God’s commitment to his promises and his own: ‘Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been “Yes and No”.’ (vv. 17-18)

The ‘yes’ that is spoken by God, then, is not the fulfilment of all the promises within the Christ event itself, as if the content of the promises were no longer live and pending; it is the partial fulfillment in Christ and in the pouring out of his Spirit on his people, as a ‘first instalment’ and a guarantee of the remainder. Paul is confident that God has ‘established’ the Corinthian believers with him in Christ, and has anointed and sealed them, along with him, with the Spirit. The implication is that the promises of God to Israel are inherited by those who are ‘in Christ’ – a line of reasoning analogous to the argument that Paul makes in Gal. 3 about the singular seed, the experience of the Spirit and inclusion in Christ Jesus. But for the Corinthians, as for the Galatians (cf. Gal. 5:5) there is still something more to wait for, a future fulfilment that will deliver on the promise that was re-confirmed in the first instalment.

2 Corinthians 7:1: Since we have these promises

The second reference to the promises of God in Second Corinthians comes at the conclusion of an exhortation addressed to the Corinthians in 6:14-7:1, warning the readers urgently against the danger of being ‘mismatched with unbelievers’ (6:14). Within the space of the five tightly-structured, rhetorically forceful verses that follow the warning, Paul confronts his readers with a string of rhetorical questions about the impossibility of fellowship between ‘righteousness and lawlessness … light and darkness … Christ [and] Beliar … a believer [and] an unbeliever … the temple of God [and] idols’ (6:14b-16a) and reminds them of a catena of scripture citations which speak of their identity as the temple of God and the call to separate from uncleanness (6:16b-18). The paragraph concludes in 7:1: ‘Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and of spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.’

Whatever conclusion we draw about the identity of the ‘unbelievers’ referred to in verse 14 and the intended function of the paragraph within the broader argument of the letter, the

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8 Amongst those who argue for the Pauline authorship of the paragraph and its integrity within the letter, something of an impasse exists between those who read ‘unbelievers’ in 6:14 as a reference to the Gentile pagans of the city (and interpret the call to separation as a reprise of the instructions concerning cultic and
most significant feature of the paragraph for our purposes in this article is the ease with which
the promises gathered together among the verses of the Scripture catena in 6:16-18 are
applied by Paul to the (mainly) Gentile readers of his letter.

The texts in the catena come from a variety of different sources within the Old Testament.
Four of them (the citations or citation-fragments from Ezek. 37:27, Isa. 52:11, Ezek. 20:34
and Isa. 43:6) are promises or commands addressed in their original context to the exiles of
Judah, and speak about return to the land and restoration as God’s covenant people. The other
two promises (Lev. 26:11-12 and 2 Sam. 7:14) are addressed, respectively, to the nation of
Israel at the foot of Mount Sinai and to David, concerning the son who will come after him.

The form and structure of the catena suggests, however, that these various scriptural
promises, originally given at different points in Israel’s history, are closely interconnected in
Paul’s understanding. In a manner reminiscent of a number of other Second Temple readers
of these and other texts, Paul indicates by the way in which he merges the citations together
that the Sinaitic and Davidic covenant formulas are applied to his readers not directly but
second-hand, refracted through the lens of the end-of-exile prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah.
The promise of Lev. 26:11-12 (‘I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor
you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people’) is
reworded and merged with the repromulgated promise given to the exiles in Ezek. 37:27
(‘My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my
people’). Similarly, the promise of 2 Sam. 7:14 (‘I will be a father to him, and he shall be a
son to me’) is merged with the language of Isa. 43:6 (‘Bring my sons from far away and my
daughters from the end of the earth’).

For Paul’s Gentile readers in Corinth, the summons of Isa. 52:11 and the associated
promises are intended to function as an urgent divine address to the readers. The effect is to
situate the readers, typologically, in Babylon on the last day of exile, summoned homeward
by divine ‘promises’ (7:1). The promises are invoked by Paul in order to reinforce his call to
the Corinthians to separate from the unequal yoke still binding them to the mind and mores of
their Gentile neighbours and keeping them from whole-heartedly embracing his gospel of the
grace of God in the weakness of the cross.

Romans 4: The heirs of the promise

Paul’s letter to the Romans opens with a claim that the gospel of God for which Paul was
set apart was ‘promised beforehand’ by God, ‘through his prophets in the holy scriptures’
(1:2; cf. 3:21), but it is not until ch. 4 that the language of ‘promise’ comes to the fore in his
argument, as he turns to an extended discussion of the promise of God and the identity of its
heirs.

The references within the chapter to the scriptural stories of David and Abraham work at
two levels. At one level (particularly in vv. 1-8) David and Abraham function as parallel
exempla of righteousness ‘credited’ not to the one who works but to the one who believes. At
another level, Abraham functions not simply as the exemplary believer but as the father of all

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9 E.g. the combined citation of Lev. 26:11-12 and Zech. 8:8 in Jub. 1:17 and the combined citation of 2 Sam.
believers – at stake in Rom. 4 is both ‘how Abraham got himself justified’ and ‘whose father he is and in what way his children are related to him’.  

At this second level, a story of Israel is implied within ch. 4, in which the engine that drives the story forward is ‘the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world’ (4:13). Paul’s point is not only that righteousness was credited to Abraham before he was circumcised (vv. 9-12) but also that Abraham was appointed the father not just of Israel but of ‘many nations’ (v. 17) and that the promise given to Abraham was given to be inherited not through the law but through ‘the righteousness of faith’ (vv. 13-16).

The reason for this assertion, according to vv. 14-15, is bound up in the fact that ‘the law brings wrath’. This assertion is probably not (at least in its primary sense, in this context of argument from salvation history) a generalising, universal statement about the function of ‘law’ but a reflection on the shape of Israel’s history under the law of Moses as a history in which the nation and the individuals within it inherited not the blessings offered by the law but the wrath of which it warned.

It is this reflection on the plight of Israel under the curses of the law that leads into Paul’s explanation in v. 16 that the promise depends on faith ‘in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us).’ The ‘grace’ in the first half of the verse is thus explicitly connected not only with the plight of the otherwise-excluded Gentiles but also with that of the otherwise-condemned Israel. ‘If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs,’ Paul has argued in verse 14, ‘faith is null and the promise is void.’

Throughout these verses, Paul’s language consistently refers to ‘the promise’ in the singular, but (as is the case in Galatians 3) the content of what the word refers to seems to embrace a number of different promises given to Abraham within the Genesis narrative, swept up together into a single inheritance. In verses 17-21 the promises in view are the promise implied by his renaming as ‘the father of many nations’ and the promise of offspring as numerous as the stars (cf. Gen. 17:5; 15:5). In verse 13, however, Paul strikingly describes the promise given to Abraham and his offspring as ‘the promise that he would inherit the world’. The vast, expansive scope of Paul’s language goes beyond any single promise that can be found within the text of Genesis, and seems to pull together the promise of the land (cf. Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3), the promise that Abraham would be ‘the father of many nations’ (cf. Gen. 17:5) and the promise that Abraham’s offspring would ‘possess the gate of their enemies’ (Gen. 22:17).

This idea that the inheritance of Abraham’s offspring was not just the land of Canaan but ‘the world’ was not a new thought; within the writings of Second Temple Judaism analogies can be found in Sirach, Jubilees, First Enoch and the writings of Philo. Paul’s understanding shows both similarities and differences when compared with the understanding implied in these earlier interpretations; he not only expands the scope of the promise of land from Canaan to the world, but also speaks of its inheritors as ‘all [Abraham’s] descendants – not only ... the adherents of the law but also ... those who share the faith of Abraham’ (Rom. 4:16; cf. vv. 11-12). In doing so he is not replacing a material promise of land with a

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10 Richard B. Hays, The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel’s Scripture (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 83. Hays’s argument is that the critical issue in Rom. 4 is the second of these and not the first, but the structure of Paul’s argument gives serious weight to both.

“spiritual” or “a-territorial” fulfilment, but he is certainly rejecting a narrowly nationalistic view of worldwide Jewish imperial domination, and probably also rejecting a bounded territorial fulfilment, in which the promise is inherited by an Israel regathered around a restored Jerusalem temple and separated from the nations by territorial borders and laws of symbolic purity.

Positively, the vision that he paints in Romans 4 is one in which the promises of God originally given to Abraham (land, covenant relationship, blessing) are gathered up together into a single, enormous inheritance – ‘the world’ (v. 13) – which is received not ‘through the law’ but ‘through the righteousness of faith’, and belongs to ‘[all] those who share the faith of Abraham’ (vv. 13, 16).

The discussion of the promises of God in Romans 4 is not the last time that the topic surfaces within the letter. We will return to Romans shortly, to examine the return of ‘promise’ language in Romans 9 and 15. But before we do so, in order to complete the sequence of texts about Gentile inclusion and inheritance, it will be necessary to jump ahead to the last of our four letters, Ephesians.

**Ephesians 1-3: Sharers in the promise**

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he is once again addressing a Gentile readership, and a crucial concern of the letter is to help the readers understand how they relate to the promises of God originally given to the nation of Israel.

According the prayer in 1:16b-19, Paul is eager for his Gentile readers to be given ‘the Spirit of wisdom and revelation’ so that the eyes of their heart might be enlightened to know ‘the hope to which he has called you … the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and … the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe’.

The close connections between the language of ‘wisdom and revelation’ in v. 17 and the vocabulary that Paul employs in 1:9-10 and 3:3-10 suggest that a crucial dimension of the wisdom and revelation that he prays for his readers to be granted is an understanding of the ‘mystery’ that is at the heart of the message Paul has been given to proclaim (3:9). The content of the mystery, according to 3:6, is the story of how the Gentiles have become heirs in Christ of a promise that was originally tied to covenants to which they were strangers. At the climax of that story, in the centre of the narrative in 2:11-22, ‘a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ’ (3:4), is Paul’s account of how the estrangement of the Gentiles was overcome. According to these verses, the abolition of the ‘dividing wall of hostility’ between Jew and Gentile (including the abolition of the Gentiles’ estrangement from the covenants of promise) has taken place in the death of Jesus, which has ‘abolished the law of commandments in ordinances’ (2:15). For Paul, the death of Christ is thus not only a soteriological event (reconciling Jew and Gentile to God) and an ecclesiological event (reconciling Jew and Gentile to one another within the ‘new humanity’

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13 A similar point could be made from the way in which Paul applies the promises of temple and restoration to the land in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1.

14 This impression is reinforced by Paul’s description of what he desires the readers to understand; the reference to ‘hope’ recalls the account in 1:11-14 of how ‘we who were the first to hope in Christ’ were joined by ‘you [Gentiles] also,’ and ‘the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints’ recalls both the Jewish ‘inheritance’ into which the letter’s Gentile readers have entered (1:11-14) and the scriptural language in which the people of Israel are described as the ‘inheritance’ of God.
of the church) but also a hermeneutical event, transforming the relationship of his readers to the scriptural promise, law and covenants.\footnote{For a brief discussion of the implications of that understanding for the hermeneutical questions that arise in Eph. 6:2-3, see Author (2011), 185-6.}

Although Paul does not tell us precisely how it is that the death of Christ had this effect, we are told that it involved reconciling Israel to God (2:16) as well as the Gentiles to God and to Israel. This picture in 2:16 of the reconciliation of Israel to God through the cross presupposes the narration in 2:3-10 of how an Israel made up of people who were ‘by nature children of wrath’, living among the Gentiles in a typological or spiritual exile, were raised with Christ from a predicament of ‘death’ that was the common plight of Jew and Gentile outside of Christ. The abolition of the law as a commanding authority over the people of God and as a dividing wall between Jew and Gentile went hand in hand with the overcoming of the ‘death’ and ‘wrath’ that had come upon Israel through the law’s curses.

The appropriation of the promises originally given by God to Israel and their application to the Gentiles are therefore best understood in the light of Paul’s reminder in 2:1-3 of the solidarity of Jew and Gentile in the spiritual death that was the continuation or the antitype of Israel’s exile. Gentiles can find themselves addressed in promises of restoration originally given to exiled Israelites – and older covenant promises repromulgated to the exiles – because the predicament of exile which the promises addressed corresponded so precisely with their own predicament as Gentiles, spiritually dead and far off from God.

The ‘mystery’ of the inclusion of the Gentiles (which ‘in former generations … was not made known’) is thus – paradoxically! – made known to the readers through a retelling of the ancient scriptural story of Israel’s exile and promised restoration, and both are located within a larger story of universal human sin and a salvation that is ‘by grace … not your own doing … the gift of God … not the result of works’ (2:8-9).

**The story so far**

The passages which we have examined so far – in Galatians 3, 2 Corinthians 1, 7, Romans 4 and Ephesians 1-3 – all contain a number of similarities and point in a common direction. The status and identity of Gentile believers in Christ as inheritors of the scriptural promises originally given by God to Abraham and his descendants is emphatically defended by Paul in Galatians and Romans, and is presupposed and applied in 2 Corinthians and Ephesians.

But the reading of Scripture that underlies Paul’s assertions about Gentile inheritance has implications for Israel as well as for the Gentiles. The basis on which Paul defends Gentile inheritance of the promises is not simply an expansion of the circle of covenant privileges, as if Gentiles were incorporated into the Israel of the old covenant through circumcision and law-adherence. The shape taken by the saving kindness of God to the Gentiles, even in their uncircumcision, is a forcible reminder of truths that were already written into the history of Israel under the law: that ‘a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical’ (Rom. 2:28) and that “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law” (Rom. 3:20).

These truths raise obvious questions for the continuing identity and final destiny of national Israel. If the promises of God are inherited by a people defined not by Torah adherence or physical Abrahamic descent, then is the category ‘Israel’ abolished forever, apart from its application to those who belong to the ‘new Israel’ of the church? Does Gentile inheritance imply Jewish disinheritance, and is that disinheritance to be viewed as irreversible?
Romans 9-11: To them belong the promises

It is to questions of this sort that Paul turns in Romans 9-11, commencing with a heart-wrenching expression of his own anguish over the issue. But Paul’s anguish over the situation of Israel is not only an expression of the fact that they are his ‘kindred’ (9:3), or of his empathetic identification with their plight. It is exacerbated by their identity as the covenant people of God: ‘They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.’ (9:4) The nation of Israel, according to Paul, are the people to whom the promises of God belong. This remains true even in Paul’s own time, after the coming of Christ. If they are cut off, then questions arise about the trustworthiness of God himself.

For much of chs. 9-11, as Paul addresses these questions, the answer that he gives seems to hold out little hope for national Israel. Paul’s assertion in v. 6 that ‘it is not as though the word of God had failed’ is supported in the immediately following verses by a reminder that ‘not all Israelites truly belong to Israel,’ and ‘it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God but the children of the promise’ (9:6, 8). A series of biblical examples follows, illustrating this principle and affirming the freedom of God to ‘[have] mercy on whomever he chooses, and ... [harden] the heart of whomever he chooses’ (9:18).

In 9:22-24 Paul poses a shocking rhetorical question:

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—including us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?

The implication of the question is hard to miss: if it turns out to be the case that national Israel was nothing more than an ‘[object] of wrath ... made for destruction’, in order to serve as part of a divine plan directed toward the salvation of others, then even that would be within the rights of God the creator. After all, as Paul has just asserted, the potter has the right to make whatever he wishes out of the clay (v. 21).

The immediate impression conveyed by the verses that follow, at first reading, is that this is indeed what God has done. Gentiles, who once were ‘not my people’ have been called ‘my people’ (vv. 25-26) and Israel – in a manner analogous to the judgement prophesied in Isa. 10:22 – has been reduced to a tattered remnant (vv. 27-29). In the paragraphs that follow (in 9:30-10:21) Paul mulls over the reasons why Israel ‘stumbled over the stumbling stone’ (9:32), concluding with a gloomy image, drawn from Isaiah, of the nation of Israel as ‘a disobedient and contrary people’ (10:21).

In the opening verses of ch. 11 the image of ‘stumbling’ resurfaces and Paul turns to the question of whether Israel’s rejection is final and irreversible. He puts the question twice, with deliberate repetition: ‘I ask, then, has God rejected his people?’ (11:1). ‘So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?’ (11:11). Both times, the immediate answer he gives is the same: ‘By no means!’ (11:1, 11). But the arguments with which he supports these two emphatic denials differ.

In the first instance, within 11:1-10, his answer is a reiteration of the earlier arguments about the remnant of Paul’s own day: ‘Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened’ (11:7). But the second answer, in 11:11-32 is more
ambitious, pushing beyond the preservation of a remnant in the present to a larger, more audacious hope.

The depiction of ‘jealous’ Israel in vv. 11-15 draws on an image already evoked in 10:2, 19 as part of an argument for Israel’s culpability. Now, however, that same jealousy is portrayed as a force through which Paul hopes that salvation will come to ‘some’ within Israel (v. 14) – a hope flanked by even more optimistic references to the ‘fulness’ of Israel (v. 12)\(^\text{16}\) and an ‘acceptance’ that will amount to ‘life from the dead’ (v. 15). In support of this hope, the twin analogies of the first fruits and the batch of dough and the root and the branches in v. 16 echo the arguments from Scripture about the remnant of Israel in the preceding chapters, and now uncover their latent implications for the rest of the nation. ‘If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy’ (v. 16).

Likewise, the olive-tree metaphor of vv. 17-24 begins by recalling the various citations from Scripture in 9:6–11:10 concerning the judgements of God on hardened Israel and the inclusion of Gentile believers in the place they once occupied: ‘Branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place.’ (v. 17) Now, however, having spoken in chs. 9-10 about the way in which Gentiles were grafted by grace into the fulfilment of promises not originally given to them, Paul makes explicit the question of whether, by the same grace, the ‘natural branches’ pruned because of unbelief could be grafted back into the fulfilment of the same promises (vv. 23-24).

In the verses that follow, the original reference of the language of the restoration-of-Israel promises (in this case, Isa. 59:20; 27:9) reasserts itself emphatically. It would be over-reading ‘all Israel’ in v. 26 to see in it an expectation of each and every Israelite embracing salvation in (or apart from) Christ\(^\text{17}\) – if that were the case, why the anguish and lament of the preceding chapters? Nor, on the other hand, is it convincing to read the ‘Israel’ of v. 26a as referring to the mixed Jewish-Gentile church as the ‘new Israel’,\(^\text{18}\) against the drift of Paul’s argument in the preceding paragraphs. The most plausible reading of the verse is to take Paul’s οὕτως in its commonest sense as ‘thus’, and read the verse as describing an extension and fulfilment of the hope that Paul has expressed in vv. 13-14 – that in this manner (by the paradoxical means of the Gentile mission and the incitement of Israel to jealousy) God will extend salvation beyond the tiny remnant to the hardened majority of the nation. What Paul has in mind here may not embrace the salvation of each and every Israelite, but it does seem to require a sufficient proportion of those who are currently ‘hardened’ and outside the believing remnant to constitute a ‘fulness’ of Israel (v. 12) comparable with the ‘fulness’ of the Gentiles (v. 25).\(^\text{19}\)

**Romans 15: A servant of the circumcised**

The final reference in Romans to the promises of God comes in 15:8, in the context of a one-verse summation of the shape of salvation history offered by Paul in support of his urgings to the believers in Rome to ‘welcome one another ... just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God’ (15:7). ‘For I tell you,’ Paul reminds his readers, ‘that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might

\(^{16}\) NRSV ‘full inclusion’.

\(^{17}\) As is argued, for example, in Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 701-02.

\(^{18}\) As is argued, for example, in N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 249-50.

confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy’ (15:8-9).

Two things about Paul’s summation stand out. The first is the way in which Paul retains the indispensable place of Israel within the story of salvation: ‘Christ has become a servant of the circumcised ... in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.’ The second is the way in which Christ’s servant-work for Israel is directed not only toward the saving of the nations but also, and primarily, toward the vindication of God’s truth: ‘Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs.’ For Paul, both dimensions matter and both belong together. It is through the same work of Christ the servant that God fulfils both his saving purposes through Israel for the nations and his saving purposes for Israel herself.

Christian Witness to Israel

What conclusions can we draw?

In the first place, Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11 is a forceful reminder of the continuing significance of hardened, unbelieving Israel within the saving purposes of God. Paul’s answer to the question, ‘Has God rejected his people? ... Have they stumbled so as to fall?’ is an emphatic, twice-repeated ‘By no means!’ ‘Israel’, for Paul, is not a superseded category, or one that has been swallowed up without remainder by the church.

But hope for Israel is not to be found in the law of Moses, or in Abrahamic descent alone – this much is made equally clear by Paul’s arguments in Romans 4 and Galatians 3-4. If the ‘unbelief’ for which branches were cut off was unbelief in Christ (cf. 9:33; 11:20), then the faith and repentance which will be an essential part of the story of Israel’s final salvation (cf. 11:23, 26-27) will take the form of trusting in and turning to Christ. Whilst the narrative sequence of Rom. 11:25-26 seems to imply a climactic turning of Israel to Christ at the end of the age, in close connection with the time of his return, the ‘so’ of verse 26 suggests that this miraculous turning should not be viewed as something disconnected from the long history of gospel proclamation, Gentile conversion and Israelite jealousy that precedes it.

It is important to read the references to ‘jealousy’ in Romans 10-11 against the background of how the language of ‘jealousy’ and ‘zeal’ function elsewhere in Paul’s letters and in the literature of Second Temple Judaism. The form that Paul’s own ‘jealousy’ took within his journey toward salvation (cf. Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:6) is a forceful reminder that the kind of Christian mission Paul has in mind is not the coercive proselytising of an arrogant Christendom but the kind of courageous, suffering, vulnerable testimony exemplified within the book of Acts by the story of Stephen and by the apostolic labours and sufferings of Paul himself.

Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11 is not itself a direct argument for Christian evangelistic witness to Israel. The principal implication Paul wants his Gentile readers to draw from his argument in that chapter is not a call to evangelise their Jewish neighbours but a warning against presumptuousness and boasting (11:17-25). The only evangelism that is immediately in view within the climactic paragraphs of the argument is the evangelism of Gentiles, through which Paul (as apostle to the Gentiles) hopes to incite the jealousy of Israel, with saving consequences (11:13-14).

But Paul’s mission to the uncircumcised (according to Gal. 2:1-10) was conducted in conscious partnership with the parallel mission of Peter, James and John to the circumcised, and even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, seems also to have maintained a vigorous

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commitment to the evangelism of the diaspora synagogue communities. This continuing personal commitment of Paul to the evangelism of his fellow-Jews is not something that he wishes his readers to view as a solo pursuit; it needs to be placed alongside the way in which he describes his (mainly Gentile) converts as ‘partners’ with him in the cause of the gospel (e.g. Phil. 1:5), urging them to emulate his concern for the salvation of others (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1), even to the extent of persuading Timothy to undergo circumcision ‘because of the Jews’ (Acts 16:3).

When these considerations are taken together, a strong case can be made for the importance of a humble, persevering, gracious partnership of Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ in making known the gospel of Jesus the Messiah to the people of Israel – in other words, for Christian witness to Israel. For Paul, the Israel of our own time remains the people to whom the promises of God were first given and therefore (along with us) the people to whom the promises of God belong. For them to enter into the inheritance of those promises will require a repentant faith in Jesus as Messiah, which will, in turn, require the testimony of the gospel.

For those of us who are believers in Jesus, Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11 is aimed at inducting us into both his anguish and his hope – the shared hope and the shared anguish of those who have tasted the mercy of God, who are zealous for his truth to be vindicated, and who long for his promises to be fulfilled among the people to whom they were originally given. Christian witness to Israel is driven by those twin passions – by the confluence of that anguish and that hope – and is directed toward the day when (to paraphrase Paul’s words in Rom. 15:10) the Gentiles will rejoice with God’s people Israel, and God’s people Israel with the Gentiles.

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21 On this point, the evidence of Paul’s own writings (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:19-23) is strongly supported by the account of Paul’s commissioning and activity in the book of Acts. Cf. the discussion in I. Howard Marshall, ‘Luke’s Portrait of the Pauline Mission’ in The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission, ed. Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 107-09.