

HAS THE CHURCH PUT ISRAEL ON THE SHELF?
THE EVIDENCE FROM ROMANS 11:15

I. INTRODUCTION

The relationship of the church to Israel is central to ecclesiology. Many scholars and theologians hold supersessionist understandings of the relationship and use a variety of texts to support their position. Among those who claim not to espouse a supersessionist reading of Scripture, there is yet the view that the church has temporarily filled the theological space once occupied by Israel, whether by redefinition, expansion, or fulfillment. Regarding the present status of the nation, many accept a temporary, *de facto* replacement of Israel by the church, although they believe in a future restoration of the nation. For example, John A. Witmer says, “Today evangelism of the world must include the Jews, but the priority of the Jews has been fulfilled.”¹

Perhaps in order to avoid the charge of supersessionism, Darrell Bock defines supersessionism (i.e. “replacement theology”) in terms of eschatology. He says, “[replacement taxonomy] focuses on how the fate of Israel, either as a nation or as a people, is *ultimately* seen. In other words, Israel can be ‘replaced for now’ at the centre of God’s programme without being

¹ John A. Witmer, “Romans,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary [BKC]*, vol. 2 (ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck; Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985) 441.

permanently replaced.”² This position seems to find support from several passages, including Dan 9:26–27; Matt 21:43; and Rom 11:15.³ This article examines Rom 11:15 and its context in

² Darrell L. Bock, “Replacement Theology with Implications for Messianic Jewish Relations,” in *Jesus, Salvation and the Jewish People: The Uniqueness of Jesus and Jewish Evangelism* (ed. David Parker; Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2011) 238 (emphasis in the original).

³ The gap between Dan 9:26 and 27 is thought by some to represent the church age, during which Israel has been “removed from the place of blessing,” or “put on the shelf” (i.e. temporarily replaced). Many understand Matt 21:43 to teach a temporary replacement of Israel. For an alternative interpretation of Matt 21:43, see David L. Turner, “Matthew 21:43 and the Future of Israel,” *BSac* 159 (2002) 46–61. Additional support is sometimes sought from other passages, as well. The condemnation of specific cities that rejected Jesus’ miracles (Matt 11:20–24 [cf. Lk 10:13–16]) is extrapolated to cover all of Israel. A similar extrapolation transforms Jesus’ condemnation of the leadership of the Temple (Matt 23:38 [cf. Lk 13:35]) to the entire nation, for the leadership represents the people. These interpretations, however, do not take into account the remnant of Israel. For a discussion of Rom 11:25–26, see Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2000) 58–64. For a discussion of “the Jews” in 1 Thess 2:14–16, cf. F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (WBC 45; Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 46–47. Bruce relates this usage to that in the Gospel of John, where it refers to the religious leadership. Certainly it was used in a restricted sense. See also, the exegetical argument of Gordon D. Fee, *The First and Second Letters to the Thessalonians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 94–103; Frank D. Gilliard, “The Problem of the Antisemitic Comma Between 1 Thessalonians 2.14 and 15,” *NTS* 35 (1989) 481–502; and Michael A. Rydelnik, “Was Paul Anti-Semitic? Revisiting 1 Thessalonians 2:14–16,”

order to answer the question: Does Rom 11:15 support the view that Israel has been temporarily rejected?

Paul begins Romans 11 with a strong denial that God has rejected Israel. How is it possible, then, for some to still speak of Israel's rejection? The problem comes with verse 15, which begins, "For if their rejection⁴ be the reconciliation of the world." Literally, the original reads, "for if the rejection of them. . . ." Does Rom 11:15 teach that God has rejected Israel or that Israel has rejected something? This is the difference between taking Israel as the object of the genitive, i.e. that God rejected Israel, or as the subject of the genitive, i.e. that Israel rejected something. The object in this case would likely be "salvation" in verse 11.

Prior to the past few decades, the meaning of "the rejection of them" in Rom 11:15 had scarcely been debated among commentators on Romans, for a virtually unanimous consensus maintained that Paul intended "of them" as an objective genitive, and therefore, that he intended to say that God has rejected the Jewish people.⁵ For some, the position is merely

BSac 165 (2008) 58–67. Scripture citations are from the New American Standard Bible, 1977 [NASB], unless otherwise noted.

⁴ In vv. 1 and 2, Paul used ἀπόσατο ("put away" or "reject"), whereas in v. 15, he uses ἀποβολή ("throwing away" or "loss"). The two are synonyms with no significant difference in meaning, and the choice of the former is due to its use in the passage from 1 Sam 12:22 (LXX), which is being quoted in Rom 1:2.

⁵ This interpretation has been found in English commentaries at least as early as that of Elnathan Parr, *A Plaine Exposition Upon the Whole 8. 9. 10. 11. Chapters of the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans*, [etc.] (London: Printed by George Purslowe for Samuel Man, 1618), *ad passim*.

Thomas R. Schreiner says, "In verse 15 virtually all scholars understand αὐτῶν to be an objective

assumed to be true. For example, in his note on Rom 11:15 in the *Ryrie Study Bible*, Charles Ryrie says, “When Israel rejected Jesus Christ, the nation lost her favored position before God, and the gospel was then preached also to Gentiles. . . . But the casting off is only temporary.”

However, since Joseph Fitzmyer argued for the subjective genitive, some have countered by giving their arguments for the traditional reading of an objective genitive.⁶ On the

genitive of ἀποβολή, signifying that the Jews were the object of God’s rejection” (*Romans* [BECNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998] 597). See also, e.g. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975); John Gill, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, [etc.] (Newport Commentary Series; London: Aaron Ward, 1746; reprint, London: Mathews and Leigh, 1809; reprint, Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2002); Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996); Handley C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Pickering & Inglis, Ltd., n.d.; reprint, Minneapolis, MN: Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, 1982); Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. Scott J. Hafemann; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Charles H. Talbert, *Romans* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002); Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer*, vol. 2 (Rom 6–11) (*Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament*; Zürich/Vluyn, Switzerland: Benziger Verlag/Neukirchener, 1980).

⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1993); Schreiner, *Romans* 597; Moo, *Romans* 693. Cf. also Ellis W. Deibler, Jr., *A Semantic and Structural Analysis of Romans* (Summer Institute of Linguistics

other hand, Robert Jewett finds Fitzmyer's argument "compelling," and he (and others) add additional support for the reading of a subjective genitive.⁷ This seems to be a question that merits more attention in any determination of the "rejection of Israel."

Of Rom 11:15, Fitzmyer says:

Some commentators understand *apobolē autōn*, "their rejection," as an objective gen., God's (temporary) "rejection of them," even comparing the gloss in Sir 10:20: "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of acceptance, but the beginning of rejection is obstinacy and arrogance." But it is better taken as a subjective gen., i.e., the Jews' rejection (of the gospel), in view of what Paul has exclaimed in 11:1, where he rejects the

Semantic and Structural Analysis Series; Dallas, TX: SIL, 1998) 264. Deibler opines, without supplying supporting evidence, that reading a subjective genitive here is "totally unwarranted."

⁷ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (ed. Eldon Jay Epp; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007) 680. Others who join Jewett and Fitzmyer in taking exception to the prevailing majority position include D. Stuart Briscoe, *Romans* (The Communicator's Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1982); Terence L. Donaldson, "'Riches for the Gentiles' (Rom 11:12): Israel's Rejection and Paul's Gentile Mission," *JBL* 112 (1993) 84; Frank J. Matera, *Romans* (*Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament*; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010) 267; Michael G. Vanlaningham, "Romans," in *The Moody Bible Commentary* (ed. Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham; Chicago: Moody, 2014) 1763; Witmer, "Romans"; and John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1989). It should be noted that one of the few who preceded Fitzmyer in taking v. 15 as a subjective genitive was Bruce Corley (cf. Bruce Corley, "The Significance of Romans 9–11: A Study in Pauline Theology" (Th.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1975) 192, 195–96.

idea that God has rejected his own people. To introduce the idea of a temporary rejection of Israel by God is to read something into the text that is not there; it is nonetheless a very common interpretation of this phrase.⁸

Apparently, Fitzmyer considers the use of Sir 10:20 as irrelevant because it merely demonstrates the *capability* of this phrase being construed as an objective genitive, but does not shed any light on the question of the *probability* of such a construction. His argument is that Rom 11:1 is much more relevant to the question at hand because it is a part of the context in which Paul has unequivocally denied the possibility of God's having rejected Israel. The most common way that interpreters square Rom 11:1 with verse 15 is to claim that verse 1 is speaking of an ultimate or final rejection, but verse 15 is speaking of a temporary rejection by God. Fitzmyer rejects this possibility as reading "something into the text that is not there."⁹

The exegetical issue is whether "the rejection of them" is to be understood as an objective genitive or a subjective genitive. Has God rejected Israel, or has Israel rejected salvation?

II. THE CASE FOR AN OBJECTIVE GENITIVE

In their defense of the more traditional interpretation of the phrase as an objective genitive, Douglas Moo and Thomas Schreiner marshal their supporting evidence. In this, they are to be commended, for many commentators fail to provide justification for their decision on this question. These commentaries are invaluable contributions to the literature on Romans, and the

⁸ Fitzmyer, *Romans* 612.

⁹ *Ibid.*

praise they have received is more than justified. Nevertheless, their justifications for this reading invite evaluation, in order to arrive at a more satisfactory understanding of Rom 11:15.

1. *Reason Number One.* Moo gives the best expression of the first reason when he says:

Paul uses the word “acceptance” in the second half of the verse as a direct contrast to “rejection.” And, while the word Paul uses here does not occur anywhere else in the NT, Paul uses a verb related to it in Rom. 14:3 and 15:7 to refer to God’s and Christ’s “accepting” of believers. This strongly suggests that “acceptance” refers to God’s acceptance of the Jews”; “rejection,” by contrast, would refer to “God’s rejection of the Jews.”¹⁰

Insert Figure 1 here

However, nothing is proven by the use of the word “acceptance.” Both “acceptance” and “rejection” can be used with either subjective or objective genitives and both can refer to the action of either God or man. In fact, the evidence cited by Moo is very selective. The same word, προσλαμβάνεσθε, is also found in Rom 14:1 and 15:7a of the acceptance of one Christian by another, and thus does not involve “God’s and Christ’s ‘accepting’ of believers.” There is nothing inherent in this word which would prevent its being used of the acceptance of salvation by the Jewish people. In fact, when John says, “He [i.e. Jesus] came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11), he uses a different form of the same basic word (παρέλαβον). This reason is thus completely unpersuasive.

2. *Reason Number Two.* Schreiner articulates the second reason when he says that verse 12 “stresses the Jews’ responsibility as sinners for their fate, while here [v.15] the accent is

¹⁰ Moo, *Romans* 693.

on God’s initiative in turning them away.”¹¹ The argument, especially as stated by Moo, is that the objective genitive should be accepted because of “the emphasis Paul places throughout this section on God’s responsibility for Israel’s present spiritual obduracy.” To strengthen this argument, he cites verses 8 and 17: “God has given them a spirit of stupor” (v. 8); and they have been “cut off [by God]” (v. 17).¹² So, the claim is that Paul’s emphasis is on God’s responsibility for Israel’s present blindness. Therefore, it is better to understand Paul to be speaking of God’s rejection (although temporary) of the Jewish people. In other words, the emphasis is on God’s sovereign activity, rather than on Israel’s responsibility. In response, two major points should be made.

a. *First Response.* Although the sovereignty of God is a recurrent theme in this chapter, in this particular section (Rom 11:11–15), the emphasis is on Israel’s responsibility. Paul did not seem bothered by the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. He turns from an emphasis on God’s sovereignty to the responsibility of the Jewish people in verse 11. Whereas in verse 8 “God” is the subject, in verse 11, “they” (i.e. Israel) is the subject. The transition is introduced by a question concerning Israel’s stumbling, and reference is then made to “their transgression” and “their failure” in verse 12.

b. *Second Response.* It is granted that though the Jewish people are culpable (as are all people) for stumbling over or rejecting Jesus, Scripture does, in fact, attribute primary responsibility to God for the blindness of the Jewish people.¹³ Paul introduces this issue earlier,

¹¹ Schreiner, *Romans* 597. In the absence of additional evidence, this appears to be a circular argument.

¹² Moo, *Romans* 693.

¹³ Isa 6:9–10; 44:18; John 12:38–41; etc.

in verses 7–10, to explain how it was possible for the Jewish people to stumble over Jesus (v. 11). Although the emphasis here is on their culpability—they have failed, for they have stumbled over Jesus, God has supernaturally blinded them.¹⁴ But even granting God’s role in the judgment of the majority of Israel, it was not that God had *rejected* them, but that he had *blinded* them. Judgment cannot be equated with rejection.

A good illustration of this point is found in Deuteronomy 29, where Moses tells the people of God’s judgment of them during the previous forty years, during which time “the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear” (v. 4). This is a similar judgment to that of which Paul speaks in Romans 11. Yet Moses points out that during this time of judgment, God has led them, neither their clothes nor their sandals have worn out (v. 5), he has provided both food and drink (v. 6), and he gave them victory over their enemies (v. 7). God was actively involved with his people, even while they were under his judgment. Therefore, neither is this second justification for the objective genitive in Rom 11:15 persuasive.

3. *Reason Number Three.* The third reason given for the objective genitive in Rom 11:15 is best stated by Schreiner, when he argues that “Paul does not deny in these chapters that some Jews are rejected by God.”¹⁵ “Therefore,” so his implied argument goes, “if God has rejected at least some, why not the vast majority?” However, that is exactly what Paul *does* deny at the beginning of the chapter, and nowhere does the text indicate that God has rejected any of

¹⁴ This is the very argument made in the Gospel of John, as well. See Craig A. Evans, “Obduracy and the Lord’s Servant: Some Observations on the Use of the Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Early Jewish and Christian Exegesis: Studies in Memory of William Hugh Brownlee* (ed. Craig A. Evans and William E. Stinespring; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1987) 221–36.

¹⁵ Schreiner, *Romans* 597.

them, although this is often inferred from verses 17 and following. Most importantly, even granting (for the sake of argument) that God rejected the majority, it still does not follow that he has rejected the nation. In fact, Paul's argument regarding the remnant points in the opposite direction. Paul argues that the existence of the remnant is proof positive that God has not rejected the nation (Rom 11:2–5).

The point of the quotation Paul has previously cited, in Romans 10:21, is to demonstrate the longsuffering grace of God toward the people of Israel in the face of their obstinacy. Then, in Rom 11:2b–5, Paul's argument is that the presence of a remnant (of which he is a representative) proves that God has *not* rejected Israel.¹⁶ In Paul's analogy of the olive tree (Rom 11:17–21), in which God broke off some of the natural branches, individuals were in view, and it was their rejection of the gospel (“their unbelief,” v. 20) that provided the basis for their having been broken off, not God's rejection of them. Judgment does not imply rejection.

Thus the olive tree illustration does not provide the support for an objective genitive in verse 15 that some think. Neither does the grafting in of the wild olive branches support a replacement view, even if only temporary. As Terence Donaldson says, “The thrust of the verse [i.e. Rom 11:17] is that Gentiles join the Jews who believe, not that they replace the Jews who do not.”¹⁷ In any case, rather than view God's activity of breaking off the natural branches as suggestive of God's rejection of Israel, it would seem more appropriate to view Israel's unbelief

¹⁶ That Paul is here explaining why he, as a Jew, could not entertain such a thought is not the preferred interpretation. Cf., the discussion by Schreiner, *Romans* 579; and Moo, *Romans* 673.

¹⁷ Donaldson, “‘Riches for the Gentiles’ (Rom 11:12): Israel's Rejection and Paul's Gentile Mission” 84.

as suggestive of Israel's rejection of the gospel. This is consistent with the view that αὐτῶν is a subjective genitive.

4. *Conclusion.* To wrap up the case for the objective genitive, Schreiner claims: "What [Paul] argues is that the people have not been rejected forever, that they have been set aside only temporarily."¹⁸ But in order to find some justification for this, he must go to the next section in the chapter, because there is nowhere else to go. So cover is sought under the olive tree. Fitzmyer's judgment seems valid, however, that injecting temporality into this passage is "to read something into the text that is not there."¹⁹ This is apparently a conclusion without supporting evidence. At this point, it would seem prudent to examine the case for a subjective genitive in Romans 11:15.

II. THE CASE FOR A SUBJECTIVE GENITIVE

The case for reading "the rejection of them" as a subjective genitive chiefly rests upon (1) arguments based upon the strength of Paul's denial that God has rejected Israel in 11:1–2a, (2) the existence and significance of the "present" remnant in Rom 11:5, and (3) the parallelism of verses 12 and 15.

1. *Paul's Denial in Romans 11:1–2a.* The view that God has rejected the Jewish people is answered directly by Paul in Rom 11:1. Here, Paul uses the strongest possible negative response to answer his own rhetorical question, "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be" (μὴ γένοιτο)! In the next verse (v. 2), he emphatically, and without qualification, declares, "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew." C. E. B. Cranfield

¹⁸ Schreiner, *Romans* 597 (emphasis in the original).

¹⁹ Fitzmyer, *Romans* 612.

calls this denial “a solemn and explicit denial, all the more emphatic for being expressed in the very words which were used in the question.”²⁰ Frank Matera says that this question, which is “the thesis of Rom. 11,”²¹ “has been the subtext of his discussion since the beginning of chapter 9.”²² Paul makes this point as emphatically and as clearly as any other teaching in Romans.

Paul must be insistent on this point, because to hold that God could reject his own people would fly in the face of the Hebrew Scriptures and would be contrary to the character of God revealed in them. To cite but a few of many such passages, in 1 Sam 12:22, Samuel says, “For the LORD will not abandon His people on account of His great name, because the LORD has been pleased to make you a people for Himself.” Ps 94:14 says, “For the LORD will not abandon His people, nor will He forsake His inheritance.” Here is the testimony of Ps 105:8–9: “He has remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac.” One of the strongest passages is found in Jer 31:35–37:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of hosts is His name: “If this fixed order departs from before Me,” declares the LORD, “then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever.” Thus says the LORD, “If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,” declares the LORD.

²⁰ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 545.

²¹ Matera, *Romans* 257.

²² *Ibid.* 261.

In view of these and other passages, as Cranfield says, “The question is thus tantamount to asking, ‘Has God broken His explicit promise not to cast off His people?’”²³

Paul’s response to the notion that God could reject his people (“May it never be,” or μὴ γένοιτο) is used in other passages of Scripture to express his reaction to other theologically repulsive notions. Based on the language used here, the possibility that someone could conclude that God had rejected Israel was just as repugnant to Paul as the notion that God could be found to be unrighteous (Rom 3:5–6). He says, “But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?” The possibility that someone could conclude that God had rejected Israel was also just as repugnant to Paul as the notion that we should sin in order that grace might increase. In Rom 6:1–2, he says, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” The possibility that someone could conclude that God had rejected Israel was also just as repugnant to Paul as, for example, the notion that anyone should conclude that Christ is a minister of sin (Gal 2:17)!²⁴ In each of these passages, Paul used the same expression, “May it never be,” or μὴ γένοιτο! The strength of Paul’s language in Rom 11:1–2 will not allow qualification or equivocation. In every case, Paul is declaring that he has “zero tolerance” for the view considered. This favors reading αὐτῶν in Rom 11:15 as a subjective genitive.

2. *The Present Remnant in Romans 11:5.* God cannot reject Israel. This is not allowed by Paul, for the clear promise of a remnant will not permit such a conclusion. That is to say,

²³ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 544.

²⁴ Rom 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11; 2 Cor 6:15; Gal 2:17; 3:21; and 6:14.

Paul's reference to himself in verse 1 and to the "present" remnant in verse 5 are meaningless if Israel is presently rejected by God (even if only temporarily)! As E. F. Harrison says of the remnant or "firstfruits" of Israel, they "contain in themselves the promise of the ultimate harvest of a nation of believers (cf. v. 16)."²⁵ Yet even in this, Harrison has not gone far enough. Paul's concern here is not exclusively with Israel in the *eschaton*, but throughout Romans 9–11, he is burdened for Israel in the present. He is presenting a theology of Israel for the present, not just for the future, for his theology of Israel informs his theology of missions.

Paul is careful and consistent in making a distinction between the faithful remnant of Israel and those who have rejected salvation. Those of Israel who have rejected salvation, while the majority, are nevertheless only a "part" (v. 25) of the nation. They have been on Paul's heart throughout chapters 9–11. They are the ones for whom Paul was willing to forfeit his own salvation (9:3), the ones for whose salvation he prayed (10:1), the ones who needed a gospel preacher (10:14); they are the "rest" of Israel who have been "hardened" (11:7). They are the ones who are represented by "some of the branches" (11:17). He writes, "From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God's choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28–29).

Israel may have stumbled (9:32–33), but it has not fallen (11:11).²⁶ Furthermore, since the majority of Israel is currently "hardened" (11:7–10) as an active judgment from God, and a

²⁵ E. F. Harrison, *Romans* (EBC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976) 120.

²⁶ This seems to be an allusion to Hos 14:1, "Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity." In verse 4, God tells Israel, "I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely, for My anger has turned away from them."

remnant is being preserved, then Israel is neither rejected, nor is it neglected. God is judging the majority, preserving a remnant, and bringing the people back to the Land in unbelief. None of these activities are compatible with the concept of a “temporary” national rejection.²⁷

When Paul asks, “God has not rejected His people, has He,” it cannot be that he is referring only to those Jewish individuals who had come to faith, as opposed to the corporate people of Israel.²⁸ It is true that he goes on to speak of the remnant in the following verses. However, Paul mentions the remnant in order to prove that God is faithful to his promises to the

²⁷ God also judged the majority of Israel with spiritual blindness during the wilderness wanderings (Deut 29:1–4), yet neither their clothes nor their sandals wore out (29:5), God led them (29:5), He provided them with food and drink (29:6), and He gave them victory over their enemies (29:7–8).

²⁸ Calvin takes the phrase, “whom He foreknew” (v. 2), in a restrictive sense, limiting its application to the elect of Israel. Cf., John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (trans. and ed. John Owen; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1849; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947) 410–11. Wilckens maintains that the lostness of Israel is proof of its rejection by God. Cf., Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* 244–45. Rudolf Bultmann also says, “As a whole, on account of its disobedience and faithlessness and especially for its rejection of Jesus, Israel itself has been rejected” (Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* [trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols., reprint; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007] 1:329–30). In opposition to this view, Cranfield says, “The fact that God foreknew them (i.e., deliberately joined them to Himself in faithful love) excludes the possibility of His casting them off” (Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 545).

nation of Israel; he is a covenant-keeping God.²⁹ In fact, the doctrine of the remnant makes no sense if the nation has been rejected. Leander Keck says, “Israel *as a people* cannot be rejected if there are Israelites who are not rejected. Paul is not the exception that proves the rule (that Israel is rejected), because as a believer he is an Israelite (*is* is emphasized in the Greek), a specific instance that demonstrates that God has not rejected the people.”³⁰ The existence of the remnant at the present time favors reading αὐτῶν in Romans 11:15 as a subjective genitive.

3. *The Parallelism of Verses 12 and 15.* The argument here moves in three stages. The first point is that Romans 11:15 is parallel to verse 12. This parallelism has been noted by many, including Moo and Shreiner.³¹ Cranfield says, “[Verse 15] repeats the thought of v. 12 in rather more explicit terms.”³² Dunn says, of verse 15a, “The structure is precisely the same as v 12a.”³³ Fitzmyer adds, “After vv 13–14, which were a sort of parenthetical remark, Paul turns now to repeat in different language what he said in v 12.”³⁴ The parallels can be seen graphically below:

Insert Figure 2 here

²⁹ Moo, *Romans* 672.

³⁰ Leander E. Keck, “What Makes Romans Tick?” in *Pauline Theology* (ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson, vol. 3, *Romans*; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995) 9; as cited by A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007) 246, (emphasis is in the original).

³¹ See Moo, *Romans* 689, 692. Shreiner says, “Verses 12 and 15 . . . are remarkably parallel” (Shreiner, *Romans* 596).

³² Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 562.

³³ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC 38b; Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 657.

³⁴ Fitzmyer, *Romans* 612. Cf. Moo, *Romans* 690–91.

Secondly, the genitives in verse 12 are subjective:

“The transgression of them” i.e. “They have transgressed.”

“The failure of them” i.e. “They have failed.”

Finally, since these are subjective genitives, and since, they are used in parallel with ἀποβολὴ αὐτῶν, “their rejection,” in verse 15, it would be more natural to take αὐτῶν as a subjective genitive, as well. Certainly, “transgression” and “failure” (vv. 11–12) are used in tandem with “rejection” (v. 15). Again, Dunn comments, “It is not necessary to specify more closely what ‘trespass’ Paul had in mind. Israel’s rejection of the gospel is the usual answer.”³⁵ Their transgression and failure was the failure to place their trust in the atoning work of the Messiah, Jesus, for salvation.³⁶ Cranfield says, “The rejection of the Messiah by the majority of Israel may properly be referred to both as their trespass and also as their defeat.”³⁷ In conclusion, in verses 11 and 12, when Paul speaks of “their transgression,” he is speaking about their “rejection” of the Messiah—of “salvation” (v. 11). He is not speaking of their rejection by God. Likewise, “fulfillment” (v. 12) is parallel to “acceptance” (v. 15). With the passives of verse 17, Paul returns to an emphasis on the sovereignty of God.

³⁵ Dunn, *Romans* 653.

³⁶ For other references to Israel’s rejection of the Messiah, see Ps 22:6–8; 118:22 (also in 1 Pet 2:7); Isa 53:3; John 1:11; Acts 2:23; 3:13–15; etc.

³⁷ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 557. Cranfield seems to take the genitive as an objective genitive, yet recognizes that it also refers to Israel’s rejection of salvation (562). This would appear to be a difficult case to make.

In answer to the questions in Rom 11:1 and 11 (“Has God rejected His people?” and “Did they stumble so as to fall?”), many commentators answer both question with, “Yes, but only temporarily,” whereas Paul answers both with a thundering, “God forbid!” For those who persist in their belief that Israel has been rejected, one question remains. It is the question Paul asks in Romans 3:3, “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” Again, he answers with μή γένοιτο, “may it never be.” One can only conclude that any view that holds that Israel is currently rejected is incompatible with Pauline theology, and specifically with his view of the faithfulness of God.³⁸

III. CONCLUSION

Rom 11:15, far from teaching that God has rejected the Jewish people, actually provides the church with a rationale for Jewish evangelism and missions in the present and also anticipates the time when Israel will be spiritually reborn as a nation. The rejection of the salvation which was offered through Jesus the Messiah by the majority of Israel has meant that salvation could be offered to the nations, even as the Abrahamic covenant had promised. In verse 15, Paul argues that if their rejection of salvation has brought such blessing to so many, how much greater the blessing when they accept that salvation, for it will not only mean the salvation of individual Israelites, but the spiritual restoration of the nation.³⁹

³⁸ See Corley, “The Significance of Romans 9–11: A Study in Pauline Theology” 190.

³⁹ The phrase, “life from the dead” in Rom 11:15 has not been dealt with in this paper, but it refers, in all likelihood, to the rebirth of the nation. See, e.g. Rom 11:26; Zech 12:10; and Ezek 36–37. Contra Schreiner and Moo, who take it as a reference to the general resurrection of the dead.

This understanding is not only consistent with the vocabulary, grammar, and context of the passage, but is also in harmony with Pauline theology. Even the Talmud says: “Rabbi Yehoshuah Ben Levi said: ‘Why is Israel compared to an olive tree? Because just as the leaves of an olive tree do not fall off either in summer or winter, so, too, the Jewish people shall not be cast off, neither in this world nor in the World to Come.’”⁴⁰ Paul agrees.

Has the church put Israel on the shelf? In a practical sense, the answer must be “yes.” But this is not the answer of Scripture, at least not the answer of Paul, as far as Romans 11:15 is concerned.

⁴⁰ *b. Men. 51b.*