

{12} A “Separate Way” for Israel? A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25-27

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This is a revised version of his article “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel? A critical examination of a current interpretation of Rom 11.25-27,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990) 87-107.

In a 1962 article concerning Judaism and Christianity, Krister Stendahl commented upon Paul’s treatment of the relation between the Jews and the gentile Christians in Romans 9-11, saying:

[Paul] goes so far as to consider the mission of the gentiles and the success of that mission in the name of the Messiah Jesus only as a detour which ultimately must lead to the point where the Jews accept this same Jesus as their Messiah.¹

Later, when his article was republished in his book *Meanings*, Stendahl confesses in a footnote: “I think I was wrong in this interpretation of Romans 11:26. The expression ‘And so the whole of Israel will be saved; *sothesetai*, does not indicate any acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.”²

Stendahl does not directly say what led him to change his mind. His comments in *Meanings*, however, hint at two possible reasons. Firstly, Stendahl refers to his book *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*³ where he implicitly offers an exegetical explanation of his new view. In his famous essay on Paul in this book he draws attention to the fact that Paul wrote the whole section of Romans 10:17-11:36 without using the name of Jesus Christ. This is not a coincidence, according to Stendahl, for Paul does not say that Israel will accept Jesus as the Messiah. “He says only that the time will come when ‘all Israel will be saved’ (11:26).”⁴

Secondly, Stendahl admits that his article is “clearly dated.” This is said in connection with a reference to the “significant milestones in the history of Jewish-Christian dialogue” in the last decades.⁵ Stendahl here points to a factor which probably changed the minds of many Christian theologians as to questions concerning Jews and Judaism. Most often this is to be seen as a positive development. Sometimes, however, one wonders if this dialogue has forced certain exegetical results, such as the one dealt with in this article.

{13} Stendahl’s new interpretation is connected with Romans 11:26. This text has also engaged the interest of many other exegetes, of whom Franz Mussner may be the most important representative. On the basis of Romans 11:26f. Mussner states: “By his parousia Christ saves

¹ The original article was published in *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 28 (1963), pp. 1-9. I quote from the reprint in Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide*, Philadelphia, 1984, p. 213.

² *Ibid.*, p.215.

³ *Ibid.*, p.215, n.1.

⁴ K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, Philadelphia, 1976, p. 4.

⁵ Stendahl, *Meanings*, p.205.

all Israel without a preceding ‘conversion’ of the Jews to the gospel. God saves Israel on a ‘separate way’ (Sonderweg)...”

We can summarize the views of Stendahl and Mussner in three points: The Jews will be saved 1) without acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah (Stendahl), 2) without conversion to the gospel (Mussner) and 3) through the parousia of Christ (Mussner). The two first points may be seen together because they both refer to the absence of certain conditions, while the third mentions the presence of a special circumstance with regard to the salvation of Israel.

It should be clear that Stendahl and Mussner do not hold identical views. Nevertheless, they have two things in common: 1) They both tie their views to Romans 11:26f. and 2) They both hold that the Jews have a special way of salvation, a *Sonderweg*.⁶

This article is a critical examination of the exegetical arguments which are given for the “Sonderweg”-position on the basis of Romans 11:25-27. It will also serve as a small contribution to the understanding of two salient points in this crucial text: the function of the Old Testament quotation in 11:26f. and the character and content of the “mystery” in 11:25.⁷

Romans 11:25-27 in a Broader Context

Romans 11:25-27(32) seems to be a “summary of key ideas developed in chapters. 9 through 11.”⁸ It would, therefore, be surprising if these verses contradict what Paul says elsewhere in Romans 9-11. Besides, in recent interpretation, chapters 9-11 are more and more regarded as the “climax” and “real center of gravity” of the letter as a whole,⁹ “an integral part of the working out of the theme of the epistle.”¹⁰ Consequently, these chapters have to be interpreted in the light of the broader context. Against this background one may ask: Is it at all possible to imagine Paul maintaining a *Sonderweg* for Israel *within the framework of Romans*? The answer is No! Ernst Kasemann has rightly stressed that “the doctrine of justification dominates Romans 9-11 no less than the rest of the epistle.”¹¹ The heart of this Pauline doctrine is that *all* who have faith will be justified. When Paul stresses the “all” he does so precisely to show that *Jews and gentiles equally* are justified through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 3:21f., 30). In the broader context of Romans it is, therefore, unlikely that 11:25-27 should express a special way of salvation for the Jews. Let me further substantiate this by some observations concerning Paul’s concept of salvation and faith.

⁶ Franz Mussner, *Traktat über die Juden*, München, 1979, p. 60.

⁷ It is not my intention to give a survey of all the different interpretations of Rom. 11:25ff. The best survey so far is Francois Refoules, “... et ainsi tout Israël sera sauvé” Romains 11, 25-32, *Lection Divina* 117, Paris: 1984.

⁸ Mary Ann Getty, “Paul and the Salvation of Israel: A perspective on Romans 9-11,” *CBQ* 50, 1988, pp. 456-469; quotation from p. 457 (with regard to Rom 11:25-32).

⁹ K. Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, pp. 4, 28. Until recently, however, many commentators considered Romans 9-11 to be a kind of supplement or afterthought.

¹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. II, ICC*, Edinburgh, 1979, p. 445.

¹¹ Ernst Kasemann, “Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans,” *Perspectives on Paul*, Philadelphia, 1971, pp. 60-78; quotation from p. 75.

{14} Salvation without Faith in Christ?

Stendahl argues that the term *sothesetai* “does not indicate any acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah.” Such a claim is best tested against the use of the term *sozein* (save) and *soteria* (salvation) elsewhere in Romans.¹²

A natural point of departure is found in Romans 1:16, the first occurrence of the word “salvation” in Romans: The gospel is “the power of God for *salvation to every one who has faith...*” In this verse one finds three important aspects of the Pauline teaching: (1) Salvation is closely connected to *the gospel* (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18; 15:2; Eph. 1:13). Therefore, the gospel has to be preached “that men may be saved” (1 Thess. 2:16). The preaching of the gospel is also presupposed when the word *sozein* is used as a missionary term, in connection with Paul’s apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 7:16; 9:22; 10:33; Rom. 11:14). (2) Salvation is given to those who have *faith*. This is also emphasized in Romans 10:9f. where the conditions for salvation are clearly stated: “If you *confess* with your lips that Jesus is Lord and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be *saved*.” This text is especially remarkable because it is found in a passage which deals with universal salvation, and which stresses that “there is no distinction between Jew and Greek” (10:12). This corresponds with the third aspect of Rom 1:16. (3) The gospel is addressed to *few and gentile equally*, but to the Jew first. Paul nowhere indicates that the gospel of Jesus, the Messiah, was addressed to gentiles only. He explicitly speaks of the “gospel to the circumcised” (Gal 2:7) and in his own ministry he tries “to win Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20; cf. Rom. 11:14).

Stendahl and Mussner both hold that the Jews have a special way of salvation.

Against this background it is really hard to imagine that Paul in Romans 11:26 should speak about salvation apart from faith in Christ. In fact his use of the word *sothesetai* indicates that Paul is thinking of a salvation of whole Israel *sola gratia* (by grace alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone)-in accordance with the use of this word elsewhere in Romans.¹³ That the concept of faith is not absent in Romans 11, is also seen from v.23. In fact, this verse contains Paul’s only statement concerning the way of salvation for the Jewish people in this context: The non-believing Jews will “be grafted in” if *they do not persist in their unbelief*. Faith in Christ is the only way to salvation, also for the Jews. There is no distinction in that matter (cf. 10:12).

This is further corroborated by the fact that Paul sees the remnant of Christ- {15} believing Jews as a sure sign that God has not rejected His people (cf. 11:1ff.). In other words, the remnant guarantees the salvation of “all Israel.” This has an important consequence, as Dan G. Johnson has pointed out: “Since the salvation received by the remnant was not divorced from Jesus Christ, neither will be the salvation of all Israel.”¹⁴

In this connection we have to mention Franz Mussner’s point that Paul does not speak about conversion as far as Israel’s salvation is concerned. This is also emphasized by Bernhard Mayer who says that the text does not deal with “the conversion of Israel, but the salvation of Israel by God.”¹⁵ This calls for some comments.

¹² The occurrences in Romans are as follows: “Salvation” (*soteria*): 1:16; 10:1, 10; 11:11;13:11; “Save” (*sozein*): 5:9f; 8:24; 9:27;10:9,13;11:14, 26.

¹³ Hans Hubner, *Gottes Ich und Israel. Zum Schriftgebrauch des Paulus in Romer 9-11*, FRLANT 136; Gottingen,1984, p.117.

¹⁴ Dan G. Johnson, “The Structure and Meaning of Romans 11,” CBQ 46, 1984, pp. 91-103; quotation from p.102

¹⁵ Bernhard Mayer, *Unter Gottes Heilsratschluss. Pradestinationsaussagen bei Paulus*, FzB 15; Wurzburg,1974, p. 290.

When conversion is set up against salvation in this way, one gets the impression that conversion is understood as a kind of human work.¹⁶ But such an idea of conversion is obviously quite foreign to Paul's thought. The concept of conversion plays no central part in Pauline theology at all. When the term does occur, it is connected with the turning from idols to the true God (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9). It is, therefore, no surprise that Paul does not mention "conversion" in connection with Israel's salvation."¹⁷

As to the absence of the name Jesus Christ, this factor should not be given much weight. Firstly, it is an argument *e silentio*. Secondly, as E. P. Sanders pointed out, "It is incredible that he (Paul) thought of 'God apart from Christ,' just as it is that he thought of 'Christ apart from God'."¹⁸ Paul does not play God off against Christ (and *vice versa*) when it comes to the salvation of mankind. And even if he does not directly say that God's promises to Israel concern Christ, "that presupposition underlies the discussion in Romans 9-11, as well."¹⁹

Salvation at Christ's Parousia?

Where Stendahl speaks about salvation for Israel apart from Christ, Mussner does not. To him it is Christ who brings salvation, though in a special way: at his parousia. The majority of scholars do not follow Mussner in what he says about a "separate way" (*Sonderweg*) for Israel,²⁰ but many agree that it is Christ at His parousia who will save Israel. That point of view depends closely on the interpretation of the Old Testament quotation in Romans 11:26f. We shall have a closer look at that quotation:

As an entry point we may use Hans Hubner's discussion. He starts his examination of the quotation with some presuppositions-based on a broad consensus among the exegetes:

1. "The Deliverer will come from Zion" refers to the second coming of Christ. The Deliverer thus means Christ, not God.

{16} 2. "Jacob" means Israel as a people, not the church including both Jews and gentiles.²¹

As to the meaning of "Jacob," Hubner correctly takes the meaning "the Jewish people" for granted. In recent years this has been the dominant interpretation. But concerning his first point, the case is not that evident.²² The main problem is that it contains two statements which should actually be set apart. It is one thing to maintain that "the Deliverer" refers to Christ, quite another to argue that it has reference to the parousia. As to the first point, there are good reasons to understand *ho rhyomenos* (the Deliverer) as referring to Christ. In a Christian

¹⁶ Cf. especially Franz Mussner, "'Ganz Israel wird gerettet werden' (Rom 11,26)," *Kairos* 18, (1976), pp. 241-255; esp. p.251 where the salvation of Israel is said to happen "without works of the Law, but also without a preceding 'conversion' of the Jews of the gospel."

¹⁷ It is, however, interesting to note that Isa. 59:20 (the text which is quoted in Rom. 11:26) is connected with conversion in a Talmudic text: "R. Jonathan said: Great is repentance, because it brings about redemption, as it is said: 'And a redeemer will come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob,' i.e., why will a redeemer come to Zion? Because of those that turn from transgression in Jacob" (b. Yoma 86b).

¹⁸ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People*, Philadelphia, 1983, p.194.

¹⁹ Nils A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, Minneapolis, 1977, p.155.

²⁰ See, however, Martin Rese, "Die Rettung der Juden nach Romer 11," in A. Vanhoye (ed.), *L'Aptre Paul. Personnalite, Style et Conception du Ministere*, BEThL LXXIII; Leuven,1986, pp. 422-430; esp. p. 430.

²¹ H. Hubner, *Gottes Ich und Israel*, pp. 114f.

²² A certain hesitation on this point is found by some commentators. Cf. the formulation by C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, II*, p. 578: "By the promised coming of the deliverer he probably understood the parousia of Christ" (my italics). Cf. also Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Romer. 2. Teilband: Rom 6-11*, EKK VI/ 2; Zurich, 1980, p. 256: "By the coming of the Deliverer Paul *probably* means the parousia of Christ as savior" (my italics).

reading of Isaiah 59:20 “the Deliverer” would almost inevitably be understood christologically.²³ Besides, the change from third to first person in the quotation (cf. the pronoun *emou*) and the words *ek Sion* (“from Zion”) point in the same direction. But a christological interpretation does not automatically imply a reference to the second coming of Christ. This seems, however, often to be taken for granted by many commentators. Other arguments in defense of such an assumption are given they are few and not very strong. Let us have a look at the most common arguments.

For Paul, the Deliverer has already come from Zion. This means that God’s truthfulness toward his promises are seen in Christ’s first coming.

1) A usual argument in favor of an eschatological interpretation is that the verb “deliver” (*rhyomai*) elsewhere (1 Thess. 1:10) is used about the second coming of Christ.²⁴ The use of the verb “deliver” is, however, no clear proof. It is used by Paul in different contexts, both referring to God (cf. 2 Cor. 1:10; Rom. 15:31; Col. 1:13) and to Christ describing a deliverance both past and future. Little importance should be attached to the occurrence of the term in 1 Thess. 1:10 since that text probably is part of a traditional, pre-Pauline formula²⁵ and cannot, therefore, serve as evidence for Paul’s use of the word “deliverer.” This is also the case in Romans 11:26 where the word is part of a quotation, not the free choice of Paul.

2) Another argument in favor of an eschatological interpretation is the more or less clear eschatological ring of the quotation and the context (cf. v. 25). This is, however, seldom spelled out. Ulrich Wilckens seems to be an exception. He stresses the future tense of the verb (*hexei*, “will come”) and calls it a “futurum propheticum.”²⁶ It is, of course, a prophetic future within the framework of Isaiah, but does Paul understand it as future? Probably not. As in the case of Isaiah 11:10 quoted in Romans 15:12, the future tense in 11:26 should be regarded “as realized prophecy.”²⁷ For Paul, the Deliverer has {17} already come from Zion (cf. 9:33). This is clearly seen if one compares Romans 11:28 with 15:8. In 11:26-28 the salvation of “all Israel” is linked with the promises to the fathers (cf. also 9:5), and in 15:8 Paul tells how these promises have been confirmed when “Christ became a servant to the circumcised.” This means that God’s truthfulness toward his promises are seen in Christ’s first coming.²⁸ There is, however, something which still awaits fulfillment. The salutary consequences of Christ’s first coming have not yet been experienced by Israel. They will become a reality once the people turn to Him in faith.²⁹

3) The third and probably most important argument in favor of an eschatological interpretation may be introduced by a quotation from Ernst Kasemann’s commentary:

²³ The messianic interpretation of Isa. 59:19f by the rabbis (cf. b. Sanh 98a) seems to substantiate this. We have to admit, however, that there is no clear evidence for such an interpretation in the first century. (B. Sanh 98a is ascribed to a rabbi who lived about 250 A. D.)

²⁴ Peter Stuhlmacher, “Zur Interpretation von Romer 11, 25-32” *Probleme biblischer theologie. Gerhard von Rad zum 70. Geburtstag*, hg. von H. W. Wolff, Munchen, 1971, pp.555-570; esp. p.561, n. 31; W. Sanday/A.C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Edinburgh, 1902, p.337.

²⁵ See, e.g., Ernest Best, *A Commentary on The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, BNTC London, 1977, pp. 85-87.

²⁶ U. Wilckens, *Romer*, 2, p. 257, n.1155.

²⁷ Dieter Zeller, *Der Brief an die Romer*, RNT, Regensburg, 1985, p. 199; cf. also Zeller, *Juden und Heiden in der Mission des Paulus. Studien zum Romerbrieft*, 2. ed, Stuttgart, 1972, p. 261. Even if Isa.11:10 has the future tense, Paul undoubtedly means that the prophetic words have been fulfilled.

²⁸ Heikki Raisanen, “Romer 9-11: Analyse eines geistigen Ringens,” in W. Haase/ H. Temporini (Hgs.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt*; Teil II: Principat; Band 25:4, Berlin/ New York, 1987, pp. 2891-2938; esp. p. 2920. Cf. also D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*, p. 261.

²⁹ D. Zeller, *Romer*, p. 199.

*Obviously the reference is neither to the historical Jesus, ... nor to the christological event as a whole , ... nor indeed to the parousia in Jerusalem, ... but to the return of the exalted Christ from the heavenly Jerusalem of Gal 4:26.*³⁰

Why is this so obvious? The answer seems to be found in a detail in the wording of the quotation, to which Kasemann refers in the preceding sentence. In the beginning of the quotation Paul writes *ek Sion* (“from Zion”) instead of *heneken Sion* (“for the sake of Zion”) found in the Septuagint. This is Paul’s only important variation from the Septuagint in this quotation and it, therefore, attracts attention. The variation may be due to unconscious influence from Psalms 14:7 (LXX: 13:7), but most commentators seem to read more significance into it. Kasemann, for instance, thinks that Paul deliberately has changed the text to suit a messianic interpretation.³¹

If Paul has deliberately changed the text, it is obviously correct to emphasize the alteration. But it is far from certain that this is the case. Berndt Schaller has recently pointed out that deviations from the usual Septuagint text in all probability are not due to Paul. They are pre-Pauline.³² Schaller does not find any reason for Paul to change the text, and thinks that the Septuagintal reading would better fit Paul’s way of thinking.³³ He explains the origin of the reading *ek Sion* in Romans 11:26 as a misreading of a manuscript which had the text *eis Sion* (corresponding to the Hebrew *le tsion*). From a paleographic point of view, such a change is easily explained: When the two uncials IC are read as a K, EIC becomes EK.³⁴ Even if Schaller’s theory is not supported by the existence of a Greek manuscript with the reading *eis Sion*, his theory is very attractive.

From another approach, Dietrich-Alex Koch has come to a similar conclusion: The reading *ek Sion* is pre-Pauline, due to a christological use of Isaiah 59:20.³⁵ Paul retained this alteration even if it has no function in Romans {18} 11:25.³⁶ Therefore one should not over-stress the wording *ek Sion*, since it is hardly Paul’s own alteration.

Nevertheless, the words must have meant something to Paul. Two possibilities offer themselves:³⁷ 1) “From Zion” may refer to the Davidic sonship of Jesus, or, more generally, His origin from among the Jewish people (cf. Rom. 9:5). 2) It may refer to Jerusalem as the place of the resurrection. To understand it in the light of Galatians 4:26 (“The Jerusalem which is from above”) seems unwarranted. It is better to take a look at Romans 9:33, the only other place where the word Zion occurs in the Pauline letters. There Zion undoubtedly refers to the earthly Jerusalem.

To sum up, the wording “from Zion” (*ek Sion*) in the quotation does not seem to substantiate the notion that Paul is speaking of the parousia of Christ. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that nothing in the context refers to Christ’s parousia.³⁸ Our

³⁰ Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, Grand Rapids, 1980, p. 314.

³¹ *Ibid.*; cf. also P. Stuhlmacher, “Zur Interpretation,” p. 561, n. 30.

³² Berndt Schaller, “Hexei ek sion ho rhyomenos. Zur Textgestalt von Jes 59:20f in Rom 11:26f,” *De Septuaginta. Studies in Honour of John William Wevers on his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. by A. Pietersma/ C. Cox; Toronto, 1984, pp. 201-206; esp. p. 206.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 203

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 204

³⁵ Dietrich- Alex Koch, “Beobachtungen zum christologischen Schriftgebrauch in den vorpaulinischen Gemeinden,” *ZNW* 71 (1980), pp. 174-191; esp. p.189.

³⁶ D.-A. Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums. Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus*, BHT 69, Tübingen, 1986, p. 177.

³⁷ Cf. D.-A Koch, *ZNW* 71 (1980), p.189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.187. N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, p. 153 also stresses the fact that no other passage in Paul’s letters suggests that Israel shall be saved at Christ’s parousia.

discussion of the quotations has, however, given rise to an important question: What is, then, the function of the quotation from Isaiah 59:20f/27:9?

The Function of the Quotation in Romans 11:26f.

According to some commentators, the function of the quotation is to give information about the *how* and *when* of Israel's salvation. Martin Rese compares the quotation in 11:26b-27 with the quotation in 11:8-10 and says that the latter explains the hardening of Israel.³⁹ For various reasons, this is hardly correct. Firstly, such an understanding depends on a questionable interpretation of the words *kai houtos* ("and so"), to which we shall return below. Secondly, the function of the quotations in 11:8-10 is not to explain the hardening. The quotations do nothing more than to underline *what Paul already has said*. The quotations underline the fact *that* the majority of Israel has been hardened, but do not say anything about *how* this happened. Without doubt, the quotation in Rom. 11:26f has a similar function. It does not explain how all Israel shall be saved. Paul's concern in Romans 11 is certainly to show that God has not rejected His people (cf. 11:1). Accordingly, his only point in the proof-text is *that* God eventually will save all Israel.⁴⁰

This point can be demonstrated from the quotation itself. Much stress is often laid on Paul's alleged alteration in the wording of the first line. Less attention is drawn to the fact that we face a mixed quotation—a combination of texts not found elsewhere. This probably means that *the combination of Isaiah 59:20 and 27:9 is Paul's own work* and part of the Pauline reinterpretation of Isaiah 59:20f.⁴¹ By adding another word about God taking away the sins of Israel, Paul shows how he interprets the salvation of the Jews: It means salvation from sin and ungodliness. If this is sound reasoning, it means that the important words in the quotation are not to be found in the first line {19} (concerning "the Deliverer"), but in the second and in the last, when Paul says "all Israel shall be saved." This is supported by the words "he will banish *ungodliness* from Jacob;" and "I take away their *sins*."

These words are significant, particularly because they form a link to Romans 4, the great chapter about justification by faith. In 4:5 Paul is speaking of the God "who justifies the *ungodly*." It is the same God who speaks in the quotation from Scripture. In 4:7 Paul quotes from Psalms 31:1 concerning those "whose *sins* are covered." It is they who are justified by faith, without works. These connecting lines clearly indicate that when Paul speaks of the salvation of Israel in 11:25-27, he refers to the justification by faith of the ungodly.⁴² Israel's salvation is thus nothing else but salvation *sola fide* and *sola gratia*. It is, therefore, quite correct to say, as does Ernst Kasemann concerning the salvation of Israel: "Only the time, not the salvation, is different."⁴³

³⁹ M. Rese, "Die Rettung der Juden," p. 429; cf. also F. Mussner, *Traktat*, p. 58.

⁴⁰ So also H. Hubner, *Gottes Ich und Israel*, p. 118. Cf. H. W. Schmidt, *Der Brief des Paulus and die Romer*, ThHKNT VI, Berlin, 1966, p.199.

⁴¹ Cf. D.-A. Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge*, p.177.

⁴² This is further supported by the context of the quotation from Isa. 59 and 27; cf. H. Hubner, *Gottes Ich und Israel*, p. 119f.

⁴³ E. Kasemann, *Romans*, p.314.

The ‘Mystery’ in Romans 11:25

We have so far examined the most important arguments in favor of the “Sonderweg”-position. However, another question has to be dealt with: Does not the term “mystery” in 11:25 indicate that there is something “special” concerning Israel’s salvation? Before we can answer this question, we have to grasp the content and character of the mystery.

The first question to be answered is this: What is the *content* of the mystery? Since the answer to a certain extent depends on our understanding of the phrase *kai houtos* (RSV, NIV: “and so”) which introduces v.26, we should have a closer look at this phrase. The meaning of these words has for a long time been subject of much debate, and different solutions have been offered.⁴⁴

Concerning the salvation of Israel: “Only the time, not the salvation, is different.”

(1) *kai houtos* has often been taken to have a temporal sense (“and then”).⁴⁵ A purely temporal meaning of the adverb *houtos* (like *tote*) is, however, not found in Greek.⁴⁶

(2) *houtos* is taken in the modal sense (“in this way”), referring to what follows: “And in this manner all Israel will be saved, as it is written (*kathos gegraptai*): ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion...’”⁴⁷ But it is rightly objected against this interpretation that Paul never uses *houtos* correlatively to *kathos gegraptai*.⁴⁸

(3) *houtos* is referring to what precedes, and has another modal sense: “and so, in that manner all Israel will be saved.” This is a very widespread {20} interpretation.⁴⁹ It is clearly possible from a semantic point of view. It is, however, not easy to see what, taken in this sense, the term should mean. The hardening of a part of Israel is certainly not a way of salvation for the Jews! It is rather something that goes before the salvation of Israel. This leads us to the last possibility.

(4) *houtos* is referring to what precedes, and has a “logical” sense; i.e. it refers to the factual and temporal *presuppositions* of what follows.⁵⁰ In this sense *houtos* is used by Paul in 1 Thess. 4:17; 1 Cor. 11:28; 14:25. This meaning also gives good sense in Rom. 11:25b-26a. What Paul says is that the salvation of ‘all Israel’ first can take place, and certainly will take place, when the ingathering of the gentiles has come to an end.⁵¹ According to God’s plan, the salvation of the gentiles is a presupposition and a condition for the salvation of “all Israel.”

⁴⁴ On this, see also F. Refoule, “...et ainsi tout Israel sera sauve,” pp. 32-35.

⁴⁵ So, e.g., E. Kasemann, *Romans*, p. 313 and C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, BNT London, 1962, pp. 221, 223.

⁴⁶ It is not found with such a meaning in W. Bauer/ W. F. Arndt/ F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago, 1957.

⁴⁷ So, e.g., P. Stuhlmacher, “Zur Interpretation,” p. 560.

⁴⁸ Cf. Joachim Jeremias, “Einige vorwiegend sprachliche Beobachtungen zu Rom 11,25-26,” in L. de Lorenzi (Hg.), *Die Israelfrage nach Rom 9-11* (Monographische Reihe von ‘Benedictina’, Biblisch -ökumenische Abteilung 3; Rome: Abtei von St. Paul vor den Mauern, 1977), pp. 193-205; esp. p. 198; B. Mayer, *Unter Gottes Heilsratschluss*, p. 284. See also F. Mussner, *Kairos* 18 (1976), p. 243.

⁴⁹ Cf., e.g., J. Jeremias, “Einige ...Beobachtungen,” pp. 198f; U. Wilckens, *Romer*, 2, p. 255; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Romerbrieff*, HTKNT VI; Freiburg, 1977, pp. 339f.

⁵⁰ So Otfried Hofius, “Das Evangelium und Israel. Erwagungen zu Romer 9-11,” *ZThk* 83 (1986), pp. 297-324; esp. p. 315; H. W. Schmidt, *Romer*, p. 199 and Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Romer*, KEK 4, Göttingen, 1978⁵, p. 355, n.7.

⁵¹ O. Hofius, *ZThk* 83 (1986), p. 315. Cf. also Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul - One of the Prophets? A Contribution to the Apostle’s Self-Understanding*, WUNT 2:43, Tübingen, 1991, p.174.

What then is the content of the “mystery”? In accordance with the interpretation of *houtos* above, we can establish that the mystery does not include the quotation in 11:26b-27.⁵² It is restricted to 11:25b-26a. Consequently, the mystery may be seen in three stages: 1) A part of Israel is hardened for a limited time. 2) The salvation of the gentiles will precede the salvation of Israel. 3) All Israel shall be saved.

Many commentators think it necessary to define the mystery more precisely. The most important proposals are that the nucleus of the mystery is.⁵³

(1) the temporal limitation of Israel’s hardening⁵⁴

(2) the manner of Israel’s salvation⁵⁵

(3) the salvation of all Israel⁵⁶

The arguments for such limitations of the mystery vary greatly, but one argument demands comment. The argument is as follows: Not all elements in 11:25b-26a are new. Consequently, they do not belong to the mystery proper. Typical of this way of reasoning is Dan G. Johnson’s comments: “It is unlikely that the mystery is the claim that all Israel will be saved, for as we have seen, Paul has already made his position on that quite clear.” He goes on:

*Kasemann’s view that the heart of the mystery is that the Gentiles’ redemption precedes Israel’s fares no better. ... In fact, the chronological ordering of events has already been indicated.*⁵⁷

In this argument, one assumes that the mystery in 11:25b-26a must represent something new compared to what Paul has said earlier in Romans. Working along these lines, Dieter Sanger comes to the radical conclusion that Romans 11:25f. is “no mystery in the genuine sense.”⁵⁸

This raises the question as to the *character* of the mystery. What does Paul mean by using the term? *Mysterion* is clearly an apocalyptic term.⁵⁹ It {21} designates something which-at the outset-is hidden for men, but which God can reveal to certain persons-often through visions or dreams (cf. Dan. 2:22, 28-30). The use of the term alone, says David Aune, indicates that Paul is referring to a “prophetic oracle.”⁶⁰ Some scholars have suggested that Paul in Romans 11 is quoting an earlier prophetic word,⁶¹ but the majority seems to hold that the oracle has originated with Paul himself. The prophetic oracle revealing the mystery is often assumed to be

⁵² Contra O. Hofius, ZThK 83 (1986), p. 311.

⁵³ F. Refoule lists seven different understandings of the mystery (“...et ainsi tout Israel sera sauve,” pp. 25-30). His classification seems, however, to be unnecessarily detailed.

⁵⁴ So, e.g., J. Jeremias, “Einige ...Beobachtungen,” p. 201; D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*, pp. 250f., H. Raisanen, “Romer 9-11,” p. 2916, n. 143 and p. 2919; John Ziesler, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, TPI London, 1989, p. 283.

⁵⁵ So e.g. N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, p.152; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology*, Grand Rapids, 1975, p. 359.

⁵⁶ So e.g. F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, rev. ed.; Leicester, 1985, p. 208 and Jacob Jervell in his (Norwegian) commentary on Romans, *Gud og hans fiender*, Oslo, 1973, p. 211.

⁵⁷ D. G. Johnson, *CBQ* 46 (1984), p.101.

⁵⁸ Dieter Sanger, “Rettung der Heiden und Erwählung Israels. Einige vorläufige Erwägungen zu Romer 11, 25-27,” *Kerygma und Dogma* 32 (1986), pp. 99-119; quotation from p. 115.

⁵⁹ Cf. O. Michel, *Romer*, p. 354.

⁶⁰ David E. Aune, *Prophecy in Early Christianity and the Mediterranean World*, Grand Rapids, 1983, p. 252.

⁶¹ This is most clearly expressed by Markus Barth, *The People of God*, JSNTS 5, Sheffield, 1983, p. 83, n. 6: “The use of the term [mysterion] may be a signal, saying that the three affirmations made in Rom. 11:25b-26a (...) were found by Paul in a (now lost) prophetic-apocalyptic book, or that they stem from a New Testament prophet.” Cf. also p. 33.

identical with what Paul says in Rom. 11:25b-26a.⁶² But such a view is questionable. Even if Paul's statement in 11:25f is dependent on a prophetic revelation, it does not follow that the content of the revelation is restricted to these verses. Consequently, it is no surprise that Paul's words in 11:25b-26a are anticipated earlier in chapter. 9-11. As Karl Olav Sandnes says:

*.... the mystery in Rom 11:25-26a represents a continuation and conclusion of the parable of the olive tree (Rom 11:17-24); or, rather, vice versa: ... the parable is influenced by the mystery.*⁶³

This means that Romans 9-11 as a whole has something to do with the mystery.⁶⁴

Against this view it may be objected that Paul's use of the phrase, "I do not wish you to be ignorant" (11:25a), clearly indicates that he is going to say something new and unknown.⁶⁵ This is hardly correct. The phrase, *ou thelo hymas agnoein* ("I do not wish you to be ignorant"), is a fixed formula, a so-called "disclosure formula,"⁶⁶ found in many Greek papyrus letters. This formula is usually found in the transition from the opening epistolary thanksgiving to the body of the letter (cf. Rom. 1:13; 2 Cor. 1:8). It may also be found within the body of the letter (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 1 Thess. 4:13). In the latter case its primary function is to introduce a new topic. The use of the formula does not, however, imply that the information given is totally new and unknown to the readers. This is clearly the case in 1 Corinthians 10:1 and 12:1. In both cases the topic treated was well-known to the Corinthians. The reason why Paul uses the formula in such cases is that it "marks the introduction of an important subject which must not be overlooked."⁶⁷ This is undoubtedly the function of the formula in Romans 11:25. To ensure that his readers have grasped the consequences of what he has already written, Paul engages their attention by using this formula.

Does the line of reasoning above imply that 11:25f. does not represent anything new compared to the preceding? Not exactly. It is probably appropriate to say that in these verses Paul "draws the conclusion of the preceding arguments,"⁶⁸ a conclusion where things are more clearly spelled out. Nevertheless, 11:25f. contains one detail which is new. And that is the precise limitation of Israel's hardening: "until (*achri hou*) the full number of the gentiles comes in."

{22} Against this background, it may be useful once more to raise the question: What is the content of the mystery Paul refers to in 11:25? The answer is twofold-or probably threefold:

(1) Seen in relation to the preceding, it seems appropriate to call the time limit (*achri hou*) the real core of the mystery. (2) If the prophetic oracle is not identical with the mystery may also include elements found both in the broader context (chs. 9-11) and in vv.25-26a.

⁶² So, e.g., D. E. Aune, *Prophecy*, p. 252: "The oracle itself consists of three lines..."

⁶³ K. O. Sandnes, *Paul*, p. 174. In this connection it is also relevant to point to the *gar* at the beginning of v. 25 which connects w. 25ff to the preceding section.

⁶⁴ D. Sanger, *Ku D 32* (1986), p.115.

⁶⁵ So, e.g., H. W. Schmidt, *Romer*, p.198.

⁶⁶ Cf. Terence Y. Mullins, "Disclosure - A Literary Form in The New Testament," *NovT* 7 (1964-65), pp. 44-50. Cf. also Jack T. Sanders, "The Transition from Opening Epistolary Thanksgiving to Body in the Letters of the Pauline Corpus," *JBL* 81 (1962), pp. 348-362 and John L. White, "Introductory formulae in the Body of the Pauline Letter," *JBL* 90 (1971), pp. 91-97.

⁶⁷ Archibald Robertson/ Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians*, 2. ed.; ICC, Edinburgh, 1914, p. 259; cf. also C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, II, p. 573.

⁶⁸ N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul*, p.152.

Then another aspect of the mystery is easily seen: The salvation of the gentiles will take place prior to, and will be a condition for, the salvation of “all Israel.”⁶⁹

These two points correspond to the first two suggestions with regard to the nucleus of the mystery mentioned above. What then about the third suggestion? Is the salvation of “all Israel” part of the mystery? This is often denied, because it is far from sensational that Paul, as a Jew, maintains that all Israel will be saved.⁷⁰ This is correct, but such a statement is, nevertheless, in need of further qualification. It is true that the rabbis took the salvation of all Israel more or less for granted. But did Paul? I do not think so—if we take his sorrow and anguish (Rom. 9:1-3) and his prayer for the salvation of his kinsmen (Rom. 10:1) seriously. In the situation in which Paul wrote his letter to the Romans, the salvation of “all Israel” was no matter of course. The majority of the Jews had rejected the gospel, and hence nothing in Paul’s own time encouraged a hope of salvation for “all Israel.” This holds true for Paul—and even more for his gentile readers. Because so many Jews had rejected the gospel, gentile believers “were tempted to think that there was no future for Israel. She had rejected the gospel and it had now passed to the gentiles; Israel was finished, rejected, cast off. God had chosen them instead.”⁷¹

The salvation of the Gentiles will take place prior to and will be a condition for the salvation of “all Israel.”

Against such a view Paul had to admonish the gentiles not to think wrongly about these things (cf. 11:13ff.). It is with such gentile readers in mind that he reveals the mystery concerning Israel’s ultimate salvation (11:25a). In the total context of Paul’s writing there can, therefore, be no doubt that the salvation of “all Israel” was unexpected. Consequently, this aspect should be included in the mystery proper.

As to the meaning of “all Israel,” there is today almost general agreement that “Israel” here refers to the Jewish people, and “all” “must be taken in the proper meaning of the word: ‘Israel as a whole, Israel as a nation’, and not as necessarily including every individual Israelite.”⁷² Such an understanding is supported by the use of the phrase “all Israel” both in the {23} Septuagint (cf. 1 Kgs. 12:1; 2 Chr. 12:1; Dan. 9:11) and in the *Mishna* (*Sanhedrin* 10:1ff.).⁷³ This means that Paul is referring to Israel as a people—including both “the remnant” (11:5) and “the others” (11:7). It has often been noted that there is a difference between the phrase “the full number of the gentiles.” and “all Israel.” E. P. Sanders suggests that there could be “an intended contrast” between the two phrases.⁷⁴ I think there is. While the “fullness of the gentiles” (*pleroma ton ethnon*) means the full number of the elect among the nations,⁷⁵ “all Israel” refers to the people as a whole. This difference is not without significance. Here we find what we could call ‘the prerogative of the Jews’⁷⁶ (cf.

⁶⁹ What this means in Paul’s thought, is probably expressed in 11:11ff, where he says that Israel will be made jealous of account of the gentile mission. Cf. Sanday/Headlam, *Romans* p. 335: “And so” means “by the whole Gentile world coming into the kingdom and thus rousing the Jews to jealousy, cf. ver. 11f.

⁷⁰ So, e. g., D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*, p. 257; B. Mayer, *Unter Gottes Heilsratschluss*, pp. 288f.

⁷¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 419.

⁷² So Sanday/Headlam, *Romans*, p. 335. Leonhard Goppelt is probably right in his comment on what the salvation of “all Israel” implies: “When all Israel is saved, there may yet be indifferent, unbelieving Jews, but there will then be no longer a synagogue nor any Jews who reject Jesus on the basis of their Law” (*Jesus, Paul and Judaism*, New York 1964, p.161).

⁷³ To the meaning of “all Israel,” cf. further O. Hofius, *ZThK* 83 (1986), pp. 316f.

⁷⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish people*, p. 196.

⁷⁵ Cf. E. Kasemann, *Romans*, p. 313; O. Michel, *Romer*, p. 355.

⁷⁶ Cf. My article “To the Jew first and also to the Greek. The meaning of Romans 1:16b.” *Mishkan* 10 (1989) 1-9.

1:16): Israel is-as a people-elected by God. As such, there is a promise of salvation for the people as a *whole*.⁷⁷

No Separate Way of Salvation for Israel

We may now repeat our earlier question: Is there nothing “special” concerning Israel’s salvation? There is, in the sense noted above: Israel shall be saved as a people. This does not, however, imply that the whole people will be saved at once, at a particular moment in history, e.g. at Christ’s parousia or before the establishment of a millennium. The last possibility is in fact a variation of the first and is often suggested by authors holding to a premillennial view. As a representative of this group we may quote the American dispensationalist J. Dwight Pentecost. In his discussion of Israel’s role in the millennium, he writes:

*“The nation Israel is to experience a conversion, which will prepare them to meet the Messiah and to be in His millennial kingdom. Paul establishes the fact that this conversion is effected at the second advent, for he writes: ‘And so all Israel shall be saved...’ (Rom. 11:26-27).”*⁷⁸

The problems connected with this view are manifold. First, it is based on an erroneous interpretation of Romans 11:26-27, as shown above. Second, it presupposes a millennial kingdom which is totally absent from Paul’s teaching. Admittedly, there are some who defend such a teaching on the basis of 1 Corinthians 15:22ff, but on very slender grounds.⁷⁹ In my view, this is best labeled speculation without biblical basis. Any doctrine-including the question of Israel’s salvation-should, however, be established on clear biblical teaching. Our treatment of Romans, and Romans 11 in particular, has shown that there is no basis for a theory that maintains *a special way of salvation* for the Jews.

As should be evident from the above, this does not exclude Israel’s unique role in salvation history. God has treated this people in a special way-and will do so in the future. But the single point which is revealed in the New Testament concerning Israel’s future is that God will remove the hardening and that “all Israel” will be saved. It is, therefore, correct to stress God’s {24} own work in relation to the salvation of Israel. But that does *not* mean that God will depart from the only way of salvation: through faith in Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 4:12). Often God’s own work is stressed in a way that excludes faith. This seems to be the consequence of Mussner’s view when he says: “The hardening, which is ordered by God, can only be canceled by God, not by a performance of faith by Israel.”⁸⁰ Without doubt, God is the one who will remove Israel’s hardening. But that does not make faith superfluous. It makes faith possible. A great change will take place in the future when the God-given hardening is removed. All Israel will come to faith (cf. 11:23, 26) in Christ.

Israel’s salvation does not take place apart from the preaching of the gospel of Christ.

Mussner’s expression “performance of faith” (German: “*Glaubensleistung*”) is also surprising. In Paul’s theology, faith in Christ is no human achievement but a gift (cf. Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8), given in connection with the preaching of the gospel (cf. Romans 10:17). This must not be forgotten in connection with Israel’s salvation. When Paul in Romans 11:13 speaks about salvation of Jews, “save” obviously is “a missionary term.”⁸¹ Even if God is the logical

⁷⁷ Cf. Nikolaus Walter, “Zur Interpretation von Romer 9-11,” *ZThK* 81 (1984), pp. 172-195; esp. p.181.

⁷⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come. A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, Grand Rapids, 1964, pp. 505f.

⁷⁹ This is clearly demonstrated by H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, pp. 556-559.

⁸⁰ Franz Mussner, *Die Kraft der Wurzel*, Freiburg, 1987, p. 53. 81 E. Kasemann, *Romans*, p.306.

⁸¹ E. Kasemann, *Romans*, p. 306.

subject in 11:26a, the missionary aspect cannot be excluded. God's salvation is offered to mankind-Jews and Greeks equally-through the preaching of the gospel. When Paul emphasizes that "God has the power (*dynatos gar estin ho theos*) to graft them in again" (11:23b), this power is related to the gospel.⁸² According to Romans 1:16, it is the gospel which is "the power of God (*dynamis gar theou estin*) for salvation!" Nothing more and nothing else. Furthermore, the fact that Israel's salvation is so closely connected "with the gentile mission shows that the salvation of Israel does not take place apart from Christ."⁸³ More precisely: Israel's salvation does not take place apart from the preaching of the gospel of Christ. Therefore, the gospel has to be proclaimed to the Jews.

⁸² D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*, p. 245.

⁸³ E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, p.194; cf. also D. Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*, p.257.