

The Key of the Mystery of Israel in the Reign of Grace

In his majestic survey of salvation history recorded in Romans chapters nine through eleven, Paul shows that God has chosen to demonstrate the sovereignty of grace through a profound interplay of judgment and mercy between Israel and the nations. It is the eschatological resolution of this paradox of history that is calculated to abound to the highest revelation and praise of divine glory. So great is the spectacle of divine glory presented in the revelation of this mystery, that as Paul comes to the end of his magnificent review, he breaks out into what is perhaps the most rapturous hymn of praise to be found in all of scripture (Ro 11:33-36).

It is most significant that Paul sees in the mystery of Israel's fall and final redemption a key to the whole sweep of redemptive wisdom. And therefore, if the end of "this mystery" is nothing less than "glory forever," Paul's zeal that the church at Rome should not continue in ignorance of its sublime content is all the better understood. If this mystery is indeed the divinely chosen medium and context by which alone the glory of an imponderable wisdom and knowledge is displayed, then how shall we explain the indifference that the church has shown towards this theme both now and through the ages? Such willing ignorance is not only to miss the glory that is invested in the mystery, but to be woefully untouched by the pathos of divine sacrifice and suffering necessary to its demonstration in history.

Hosea's prophecy of the covenantal rejection of "Loammi (not my people)" illustrates a pattern consistently observed in the method of grace.¹ "And it shall come to pass that *in*

¹ It is hasty to assume that Paul's use of the Hosea prophecy in the context of Romans chapter nine should be taken as a 'reinterpretation' of its original context and meaning. Nothing in Paul's application of this prophecy to the anomaly of gentile incorporation into the covenant can be taken as support for the view that Israel's national promises are now canceled and transferred to the church, a position known lately as 'replacement theology'. Rather, Paul sees in Hosea's prophecy a profound pattern of divine dealing that is properly applied to gentiles who, in like analogy to Israel, have passed from a 'not my people' status to become through the election of grace 'the sons of the living God'. Such a principle, though appropriately interchangeable in its application, in no way alters Israel's millennial hope. So far from 'reinterpreting' or 'spiritualizing' the original context of Hosea in a way that cancels the promises of God to Israel, Paul points by comparison to the sovereign prerogative that is able to change a 'not my people' into covenant heirs. The reversal that the Gentiles have lately experienced as a former 'not my people' is in glorious parallel with what Israel will know 'in that day' when they are reinstated from the rejection of 'not my people'.

the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, *there* it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God”. But why “**there?**” namely, “*in the place* where it was said?”

Through the mystery of a hidden wisdom not revealed in other ages, Israel and the Gentiles experience a profound reversal of status and role in the covenant exclusion of “not my people,” until the pride of human sufficiency is utterly exposed and finally broken. In order to underscore the controversy of the covenant, the elect nation is surrendered to an age long judgement of desolation and dispersion during the same period that God is extending mercy (“a door of faith”) to the Gentiles. This means that as Israel is blinded² and given up to the curse of the covenant, God is granting repentance to those who were formerly ‘not a people’, calling out from among the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 11:18; 15:14).

This astonishing turn of events is foreseen in the prophetic song that Moses was commanded to teach the children of Israel. The stated intention of the song is to provide a record of prophetic witness to be handed down to future generations.³ In both protest and promise, the song is a prophetic synopsis of the whole course of Jewish history. The song begins with Moses calling heaven and earth to witness “against” a chronically rebellious disposition of heart that is predicted to persist until the final tribulation of the “latter days.”⁴

Among the judgements named is God’s astounding purpose to ‘turn the tables’ on the covenant nation. “They have moved me to jealousy with that which is not God; they have

² A host of Old Testament passages predict the hiding of God’s face until the eschatological restoration (Deut 31:17,18; 32:20; Ezk 39:24,29; Isa 54:8)

³ Now therefore, write down this song for yourselves, and teach it to the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. When I have brought them to the land flowing with milk and honey, of which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and filled themselves and grown fat, then they will turn to other gods and serve them; and they will provoke Me and break My covenant. Then it shall be, when many evils and troubles have come upon them, that this song will testify against them as a witness; for it will not be forgotten in the mouths of their descendants, for I know the inclination of their heart today, even before I have brought them to the land of which I swore to give them” (Deut 31:18-21).

⁴ Deut.31:27,29 with 29:4; but as to the promise compare 30:1-6; 32:43 with 4:29,30.

provoked me to anger with their vanities: and I will move them to jealousy with those who are not a people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation” (Deut 32:21). Thus it is seen that through a paradox of election and covenant exclusion, God has chosen to demonstrate His own sovereign prerogative in grace by turning to bless a “not a people.”⁵ At the same time, Israel must drink the bitter cup of exile as a “no people.”

Through the reversal of covenant status, Israel is made to demonstrate the futility of approaching God on any basis other than grace through faith alone (Ro 11:6). Even before the stone of stumbling was historically embodied in Jesus, Israel had already stumbled through its habitual failure to seek the commanded righteousness on the basis of faith (Ro 9:31,32). Instead they approached the standard of righteousness “as if it were a law of works” (that is to say, as though it were possible with man). Certainly the Jews were not adverse to faith. They would most certainly have included faith as a necessary part of covenant obedience. But the faith of the remnant is distinguished by an utter despair of attaining righteousness through the law. Only through a death to every natural confidence is this faith given. So it is the cross in principle before it is the cross in history. When the commandment is seen at last to require a righteousness that is ‘impossible with man,’ the very ‘place’ of covenantal rejection and disenfranchisement then becomes the place of restoration and resurrection through the gracious imputation of a divine and everlasting righteousness.

Therefore we can say that the momentary rejection of Israel as “not my people” is a solemn judgment intended to remove confidence in the flesh and every ‘natural’ claim on divine grace. It intends to lay open the divine rejection of every unsound confidence, whether of lineal descent, or moral and religious advantage, indeed, “whatever is not of faith.” God will not be indebted to man as man, however moral or religious. Nothing else

⁵ Jesus’ application of Moses’ prophecy: “Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof. And he that falleth on this stone shall be broken to pieces: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will scatter him as dust”(Matt 21:43-44). “And I say unto you, That many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matt 8:11-12).

so stands between our natural presumption and the sovereignty of grace as the revelation of this mystery. That the salvation now extended to Gentiles has come at Israel's expense. And not on the basis of any superiority of the Gentile who has believed (seeing that faith itself is a gift of grace). That it is only "through their fall" that a "door of faith" is opened to the Gentiles.⁶

Only as the veil of human will and moral sufficiency is shattered by the 'No' of divine justice can the 'Yes' of God in Christ be heard. A kind of hearing is required that is only possible where there is first a death to any residue of confidence in one's own righteousness. Such hearing comes only through 'the Word of division'. For this, there must be first a "dividing asunder of soul and spirit" (Heb.4:12) that is only accomplished as the Word is quickened by the Spirit. It is the quickened Word that kills in order to regenerate,⁷ that cuts in order to heal.⁸ It is the principle of resurrection out of death. Therefore 'in the place' where the stern sentence of justice is clearest, 'there' the word and work of grace is dearest. The revelation of this grace comes with the revelation of death to all that the apostle Paul calls "confidence in the flesh."

The word of grace and resurrection is always preceded by the word of judgment, and sanctified by an unfeigned acknowledgement of its awful righteousness, however severe (Lev.26:40-42). The righteousness of the Lord's severity alone prepares the way for the glory of grace and mercy. "Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God" (Ro 11:22). To refuse to acknowledge the righteousness of God's severity is to downgrade the cost, the sovereignty, and the glory of His goodness on the vessels of mercy. This wisdom is observed in the order of the dispensations: "For the law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (Jn.1:17).

⁶ The blessing of the Gentiles through Israel's redemption was no secret. But it was unimagined that this blessing would come through the revelation of the mystery of the gospel at which Israel would offend and stumble. And that through the salvation of the Gentiles the scripture be fulfilled that Israel would be provoked to jealousy by a foolish nation.

⁷ Compare 'hearing' in Heb. .3:7 with 'the word of division' in Heb. 4:12

Since the word of grace can not be more precious than the preceding word of judgement is clear and dreadful, the second (the word of grace) is only heard ‘in the place’ of the first (the word of judgement). Unless ‘the first’ is profoundly ‘heard’ and justified as utterly righteous and inexorable in its requirement, ‘the second’ can not come in a depth and power that endures (“because they had no depth of earth...no root in themselves,” Mt. 13:5,6,21).

We see this pattern demonstrated in the episode of Jesus’ encounter with the Syrophenecian woman (Mt 15:21-28; Mk. 7:25-30). To prepare the way of mercy, Jesus enforces recognition that the provisions of the covenant are restricted to Israel by right of unconditional election. The woman’s humble submission to the sovereignty that justly excludes her constitutes a study in true spiritual poverty. Far from an attitude of insult and offence towards the sovereignty of God’s discriminating choice, she justifies the righteousness of divine denial with the exclamation “truth Lord!”

Observe the method of grace in the tact that the Lord takes with this desperate woman. Through the wisdom of an initial denial, the woman is brought to a humility that now becomes the place of God’s boundless Yes! Natural and moral disqualification becomes the basis of gift and grace. Jesus must take before he can give, that is to say he must remove natural hope in order that she might receive God’s gift on the basis of grace that is only accessible to faith. After such a proving, grace is much more amazing and God is much more glorified.⁹ Here once more we see an example of that great axiom of redemptive wisdom: “He takes away the first that He may establish the second.” The woman’s imploring words “Truth Lord!” embodies the starting point for any appeal to the ‘throne of grace’.¹⁰

⁸ Circumcision of the heart’ a frequent Old Testament term for regeneration.

⁹ Incidentally, this event anticipates the New Testament revelation that through Christ, the covenant is made to stand essentially with all the seed of faith.

¹⁰ Throne indeed, because for grace to be grace, it must be sovereign and unconstrained in all of its dispensations.

Covenant exclusion, thus understood, becomes the necessary setting for grace, not only to Gentiles of this dispensation, but to all the saints of the older dispensation who despaired of perfecting righteousness under the first covenant. In order for grace to be free, sovereign, and unconditional, it is not only lawlessness that is rejected, but even the presumption of religious man who imagines a righteousness that requires something less than death and resurrection. The design of all is to empty the heart of this its most naturally resilient tendency.

However impressive its natural nobility and virtue, the 'righteousness' that issues out of the first creation is rejected as inadequate to fulfill the covenant. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zech 4:6). Not only is man spiritually inert through original sin, he is further distanced from the life of God through the inclination of a fallen nature of enmity towards God. The principal character of this enmity is an irrepressible proclivity towards the autonomy of self will. It is the strength of this inborn presumption that stands between fallen humanity and the meekness of the divine nature.

The last obstacle to grace is not so much those things that men count vile, but the irrepressible presumption that righteousness stands even partly in human ability. At the end of power is the confession that no longer justifies self but God, "if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they accept of the punishment (that it was neither unjust nor incommensurate) of their iniquity" (Lev.26:40-42).

Nothing more effectively bars the door of grace than the delusive presumption of self-determinism. Hence, coming to terms with the justice of God's sovereignty, whether in judgment or in distinguishing grace¹¹ is necessary if we will be brought to 'the place' (the dust of helplessness) where the 'Yes' of grace and resurrection can be 'heard' in transforming power. In this way the old is crucified to its own initiative so that the power to believe and live might appear as removed from human initiative as a corpse promoting its own resurrection. This since Christ is only revealed as our righteousness at the end of

strength, and therefore ‘the end of the law’ (Ro. 10:4). “How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed” (Amazing Grace, John Newton). Indeed, grace is never so precious until faith itself, the one thing needful, is seen as ‘impossible to man’ apart from the gift of quickening grace.

This is how the truth of unconditional election severs at the root the one thing blocking the reach of reconciling mercy, namely, confidence in the flesh. Like the word of the cross, it destroys all hope of a righteousness that is one’s own; the best virtues of which fall hopelessly short of that righteousness which is Christ’s alone. Therefore, the most admired of those virtues that can be generated by human will and moral ability can never be the basis of divine acceptance (see Jn.1:13 with Ro.9:16). Because election assumes the total destitution of the natural man as spiritually dead, it ultimately becomes the ‘Yes’ of grace to all who justify God’s sovereign right to “quicken whom He will” (Jn.5:21), and that “apart from works” (Rom.4:6). “So then, it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs” (Ro.9:16).

Strategically, He has “concluded all [both] in unbelief” that no flesh might glory, and so that mercy might appear to the praise of the glory of grace alone. If grace is to be demonstrated as free, unconstrained, and uninfluenced it must be ‘according to election.’ And “in order that the purpose of God according to election might stand” (Ro.9:11), “it is [necessarily] not of him who runs or of him that wills” (Ro. 9:16).

With the principle of covenant rejection as background, we turn now to consider the process that effects the covenantal reinstatement of Israel as a redeemed nation. There is one condition for which Israel waits that must be realized before the Shekinah glory can return to a resurrected and reborn nation. Specifically, it is “when He sees that their power is gone” (Deut 32:36);¹² and again “when He shall have accomplished to scatter the power

¹¹ See Mt. 20:15 with Lk. 4:25-28.

¹² Compare Lev.26:19 “the pride of their power;” also Isa.57:10 where the divine indictment is directed against a humanistic optimism that fails to acknowledge its destitution; “You were wearied by all your ways, but you would not say, ‘It is hopeless.’ You found renewal of your strength, and so you did not faint (NIV).

of the holy people, all these things shall be finished” (Dan 12:7).¹³ Is this not also a principle that the church must realize for itself if it will attain to its own eschatological victory and fullness?¹⁴

The Mystery Explained

The same mystery of the gospel that seals the judgment of natural Israel [‘the children of the kingdom’] gathers in the Gentiles. The gospel is at once a “door of faith to the Gentiles,” and the eschatological judgment of Israel who by reason of a hidden fulfillment could not recognize, ‘the time of visitation.’ After generations of being “hewed by the prophets rising early,” (Hos.6:5; Jer.25:4) the plummet of judgment came in the form of the ‘messianic secret,’ when the long awaited Messiah appeared in the unexpected role as the eschatological ‘stone of stumbling’ and ‘rock of offense.’

The death of the Messiah came as a result of the mystery of his identity. “Who do men say that I am?” And “For had the princes of this world known the mystery, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1Cor.2:8). Why was His identity hidden from Israel? Manifestly, to effect the dual purpose of judgment and atonement.

The mystery means that the ‘hidden wisdom’ of redemption is only accessible by the Spirit of revelation. The mystery of the two advents (Messiah’s death and resurrection in the midst of history and His subsequent return at the day of the Lord) was completely hidden from Israel. And if this much was hidden, how much more the time between the two advents that must see the full extent of the Deuteronomic curse? (Paul shows how Moses foretold this period during which time God’s face remains hidden while a ‘not a people’

¹³ This prostration of Israel’s power in the time of Jacob’s trouble is necessary to finish Israel’s transgression (Dn.9:24; 12:1; Jer.30:7).

¹⁴ The church completes its witness through a last days travail precipitated by the crises of Israel (Isa.66:7-8; Dn.11:33-35; 12:3,8-10; Rev.6:9-11; 12:2).

are chosen to provoke the nation to jealousy. (Compare Ro. 9-11 with Deut. 31:17,18; 32:20-21; Isa. 8:17; Isa. 54:8; and Ezk.39:23,24,29).

By its mysterious and therefore unforeseen character, the 'secret' at once 'fulfills the scriptures of the prophets' (Ro.16:25-26; Col.1:25), being 'none other things than those which the prophets and Moses said should come' (Acts.26:22), and brings the stroke of judgment quietly in unexpected advance of the day of the Lord. Indeed, if what was foretold in the prophetic writings had been known there could have been no atonement for Jew or Gentile. "For had they known it [the mystery] they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1Cor. 2:7). But because the plan, although foretold, was hidden in the mystery, the builders rejected the cornerstone of the entire covenant edifice. The secret which is a 'trap and a snare' to apostate Israel (Isa.8:17) becomes a 'revelation' of the gospel to the remnant ("seal it up among my disciples"), and 'a door of faith' to the Gentiles, and all in strictest conformity to what stands written in the prophetic scriptures (Acts 26:22; Ro.1:5; 6:26 et al.).

Thus by means of a prophetic mystery, the dividing Word (veiled in a mystery of incarnation and prophetic paradox) passes through Israel like a winnowing scythe separating the remnant (the true 'ekklesia' or assembly of God) from 'the rest [who] were blinded' (Ro.11: 7; based on Deut.31: 17,18; 32:20; Ezk.39:22-29) Paul shows that his own turning to the Gentiles is according to the judgment threatened by Moses Deut.32:21. This judgement continues throughout the balance of a period termed 'the times of the Gentiles' and reaching to "the fullness of the Gentiles" (Lk.24:21; Ro.11:25).

Paul will show that the eschatological 'Israel of God' is now as always the 'preserved seed,' 'the election of grace'. However, according to the revelation of the mystery, the remnant of the 'holy seed' is now extended to include a remnant from among the Gentiles, "a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). These are grafted into the spiritual 'Israel of God' and by this gain an interest in the promises covenanted with Israel. Notice that contrary to

the presuppositions of ‘dispensational’ theologians, Paul equated the ‘hope of Israel’ with the hope of the gospel (Acts 26:6,7).

The present inter-advent period is nowhere called ‘the church age’ as such, but ‘the dispensation of the grace of God to the Gentiles.’ This dispensation is unique occupying the period of Israel’s judicial blindness and dispersion. It is co-extensive with ‘the times of the Gentiles’ (Lk.21:24), but is distinguished as the time that God is “calling out from among the Gentiles a people for His name.” This particular time of Gentile blessing reaches to a ‘fullness of the Gentiles’ that issues in the ‘restitution of all things’ when the ‘deliverer shall come out of Zion to turn ungodliness away from Jacob’ (Ro. 11:25-26). This is the moment of Israel’s national regeneration as ‘the escaped of Israel’ are born ‘at once’ (Isa.66:8), and the iniquity of the land ‘removed in one day’ (Zech.3:9).

While in one sense the church of this particular dispensation marks a provisional period, (a time of predominately Gentile election designed to move the Jew to jealousy), the church as a spiritual organism includes the elect of all ages (the corporate seed of the woman and the Spirit). The seed of Christ and of the Spirit are all redeemed by the same once and for all sacrifice and can not be limited to this dispensation, but are part of a more comprehensive and “eternal purpose to gather into one all things in Christ” (Eph.1:9) “which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all” (Eph.1:23). The church is an organism made up of all the seed of the Spirit as “God is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Mt.22:32). The purpose of God to gather all things in Christ is a **purpose that spans the dispensations.** “Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Eph 3:21). The eternal purpose in Christ constitutes the end and goal of all the provisional dispensations and covenants whether conditional or unconditional, temporal and eternal. However, the eternal phenomenon of Christ and the church embracing all ages past and future was a mystery unknown until its revelation to the first century apostles and prophets.¹⁵

¹⁵ We must be careful not to conclude that because something is recently revealed that it is necessarily newly existent. How could the mystery of the church have been known prior to the revelation of the mystery of Christ and of the

It was commonly understood from prophecy that all nations would benefit and be blessed as a result of Israel's national regeneration in 'that day' when a nation would be born 'at once'. It was not known, however, that the covenant of regeneration (the 'new covenant' promised particularly to the nation; Jer. 31:31-34; Isa.59: 21,20; with Ro.11:26-20) would be extended to elect Gentiles before the time of Israel's national deliverance (Ezk.39:22; Dan. 12:1,2). Instead of the nations being blessed with the overflow of Israel's millennial glory as well known from prophecy, 'the revelation of the mystery hid in other ages' means that the Gentiles are unexpectedly included in the covenant of regeneration (ratified in Messiah's atoning death), and this not as a result of Israel's restoration, but during a time of national judgement and blindness (Mic.5: 3; Hos.5:14 – 6:2).¹⁶

During this temporary blindness and judgment, the face of God is hidden from the elect nation and a remnant (predominantly Gentile) is blessed in their place as foretold by Moses (Deut. 31-33) and Jesus (Mt.21). This is the great anomaly of history, and is calculated to drive the apostate nation to jealousy as the despised remnant of Jew and Gentile in gospel

gospel? Indeed, such could not be revealed until "after the Son of Man be risen." Therefore, just as both Christ and gospel existed before the time of full revelation, so the church as a spiritual entity had real organic existence even before it could be revealed in its full character as "the body of Christ". Until then, the children of the Spirit could only be known by such designations as 'the assembly of the righteous', the circumcised of heart, the godly 'seed' or 'remnant' etc. Indeed, the very language of such a distinction as 'the body of Christ' could not have been used until after the revelation of the mystery of Christ and the gospel, neither of which had their origins in the first century.

¹⁶ Paul shows that the mystery hid in other ages involves also the means by which the Gentiles would be made fellow heirs. It was to be 'by the gospel' (Eph3: 6). That the gospel was the mystery by which the Gentiles would be made partakers of the covenants of promise is shown clearly by a comparison of Eph. 6:19 with Ro. 16:25, 26). This demonstrates how fully something may be foretold in the prophetic writings, and yet remain a mystery until the appointed time of revelation. Thus to say that the mystery that Paul has in view can not be something foretold in the scriptures of the prophets misses entirely the nature of the mystery. Paul himself claimed that the whole content of his preaching was '*none other things* than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come." (Acts 26:22). Modern dispensational writers have defined the mystery as something "distinct from anything anticipated in the Old Testament." The period between the two advents of Christ, dubiously called 'the church age' is understood to constitute a mystery 'parenthesis' in God's prophetic program for Israel. The church is a new mystery organism existing on earth only between Pentecost and the rapture, and must therefore be removed from the world scene before the tribulation events of prophecy. This is because Old Testament prophecy concerns only Israel and not the church as conceived under this view of the mystery. An example of this kind of thinking is represented by the following quotation taken from J.F. Walvoord's 'The Rapture Question': "Nothing should be plainer to one reading the Old Testament than that the foreview therein provided did not describe the period between the two advents." This is a novel conception of the mystery, built up by dispensational presuppositions. The case for dispensationalism's peculiar definition of the mystery is without support from Pauline usage of the term. This has already been demonstrated above by comparing Paul's own use of the term in connection with the gospel. That the gospel is both a mystery and yet thoroughly foretold in the Old Testament is beyond dispute.

community embody through the power of the promised Spirit the true intention of the covenant.

Note also that the election of Israel is conceived in terms of a corporate entity comprised of the natural descendants of Abraham through Isaac. The promise is never satisfied with only a remnant; the covenant of Israel's election is not fulfilled apart from the repentance and regeneration of the whole of the nation. So long as one Jewish individual remains that may say to his fellow "know the Lord," the covenant yet awaits to be established "with them" (Ro.11:27 with Jer. 31:34).

Why then, if the middle wall of partition is dissolved, and the 'church' is now comprised of an election out of every nation, does this not sufficiently realize and fulfill the covenanted promise as now revealed in the gospel? Why, if the promise was never to the children of the flesh as such alone (but only ever to the remnant of election and promise), must there be a reinstatement of the natural branches in order to fulfill the provisions of the promise and covenant? And why must the Jews as Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham, be restored to the land as a physical national entity? Manifestly, there is a remnant of natural Jews presently in the church, but as Paul goes on to show, this is only the pledge of prescribed covenant conditions that can not be met short of the righteousness of "all Israel". The promise speaks of time when there will no longer be only a remnant that attains to covenant righteousness, because the entirety of the nation, born in a day, will be regenerate and preserved in holiness forever (see Isa.4:3; 54:13; 59:21; 60:21; Jer.31:34; 32:39,40).

It is commonly considered that since Israel's role in history is completed with the advent of Christ and the universalism of the gospel, what further significance can possibly attach to ethnic distinctions? Superficiality here stems from superficiality at a more fundamental level. If the primary goal of the gospel is only to make salvation universally available, why take such a circuitous route? This fails to understand why Israel was chosen in the first place. And why is the preservation of Israel's national distinction an intrinsic feature of

the covenant of promise (Jer.31:35-37), and ultimately strategic to the future of divine purpose and glory?¹⁷

Many look for an end-time ingathering of Jews to fulfill Romans 11:25-29, but treat it as something peripheral, indefinite, and incidental to the eschatological harvest of nations. The restoration of Israel is little considered as a necessary feature of the promise, intrinsic to the logic and nature of the covenant. Little attention is given to the centrality of Israel as the historical demonstration and vindication of the divine prerogative in election, calling, and grace. Not only this, but to treat the reinstatement of the natural branches as nothing more than an incidental feature of last days world evangelism, misses entirely the whole strategy and genius of the redemptive scheme. It certainly ignores the most preponderant theme of Old Testament prophecy (Israel's redemption from the midst of her darkest hour in the everywhere mentioned 'day of the Lord').

Not only does this 'ignorance' (Ro.11:25) obscure the place of the present period ("the dispensation of the grace of God to the gentiles") in the larger scheme of the ages, but also the distinctive role of Israel and the gentiles in creation and history so that a strategic dialectic is maintained through which judgment and salvation is mediated to the glory of the free sovereignty of grace in election. Such a view, while seeming to grant to Israel a token acknowledgment, misses utterly the wisdom and strategy of the divine purpose, and not only this, but the cost and solemnity of the divine investment required for the theodicy¹⁸ of judgment and glory which lies at the heart of Israel's original calling and role in redemptive history.

¹⁷ Manifestly, the divine preservation of Israel as a distinct race is necessary in order to demonstrate that the purpose of God is indeed 'according to election'. The distinction between Jew and gentile, although spiritually abolished 'in Christ', is necessarily maintained in the creation in order to underscore and highlight this reigning principle: that grace, in order to be grace, must be "according to election," thus distinguishing its true character and nature as perfectly free and sovereign in its working. Only the mercies of distinguishing, electing grace is suited to the kind of ultimate glory that will be the inheritance of God and the elect. The existence of Israel provokes world confrontation with the sovereignty of grace through unconditional election, manifestly apart from the will of man. This explains why for a final thousand years all nations are compelled to witness again history's most lavish demonstration of distinguishing grace on this elect people. Grace is defined by election.

As to the when and how of Paul's statement, 'and so all Israel shall be saved,'" of which so many disavow certainty, let us state emphatically our amazement at the 'modest reserve' of these interpreters. **No subject in all the prophetic scriptures is more abundantly revealed, or more specifically defined than the time, circumstances, and manner of Israel's final redemption.** To disclaim certainty on this point betrays not a scarcity of definite biblical evidence concerning the nature and time of Israel's eschatological redemption, but a woeful insensibility towards the plain language and context of the most prominent theme of prophecy and promise. Such modest ambivalence concerning this troublesome theme has nothing to do with any ambiguity inherent within the language and intent of the text. It is rather the product of an unwarranted process of 'reinterpretation' (spiritualization) applied only to those prophecies that promise the future repentance and glory of ethnic Israel.

It is noteworthy that among evangelical exegetes, no other category of biblical interpretation is handled in this way. It is just at the point of prophecy where Israel is particularly concerned that the ordinary meaning of words are denuded of their original context and meaning. The covenantal curses are maintained as applying literally to Israel, while the promises of grace and redemption are spiritualized and taken over by the 'church.'

Instead of harmonizing the testaments, the plain sense of language is effectively spiritualized into oblivion. The original face of prophecy is disfigured beyond recognition. Hermeneutical method becomes a cloak for the plague of unbelief; and tragically, Israel is even more distanced, not by the divinely intended offense of Christ, but by the scandal of those inside the church who, in historic ignorance of the mystery, and against New Testament revelation, insist that Israel is forever 'replaced' by the church, failing to recognize that the covenant remains outstanding 'with them' (i.e., the Jew as Jew) *until*

¹⁸Theodicy is the formal term for the problem of reconciling human and divine anguish with God's goodness and sovereignty.

the nation and church are no longer separate entities (cf. Jer. 31:34 with Ro. 11:25-29) but co-expressions of a new creation.

A church that is yet 'wise in its own conceits' for want of this central mystery of redemptive history and wisdom is lost to all consciousness of its eschatological role and calling to provoke Israel to emulation and to faith. It is the one mystery that is calculated to level all proud flesh, Jewish and gentile alike. Indeed, it is at the heart of the comprehensive 'mystery of God,' the resolution of which history is waiting (compare Rev.10:7 with Ezk.39:21-23).