

Romans 11:17, Israel, the Church & the Olive Tree
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Defending Premillennialism

As we think of the theme “Defending Premillennialism,” naturally we think of the theological category of eschatology. But I think that premillennialism is more than merely a feature of eschatology, and we can approach this topic from a slightly different angle. I remember some years ago, when, regretfully, a very bright student of mine adopted the post-trib rapture position. I gave him all my best arguments both against post-trib and for pre-trib. But, alas, Doug Moo had gotten to him first, and he could only see the Scriptures through the post-trib lens of Douglas Moo’s interpretation. However, there were still one or two things that bothered him – not about the rapture, *per se*, but about what a post-trib rapture implied about other eschatological events. He asked me one day about what was bothering him the most. “Pastor Gunn,” he said, “I know the Bible describes a millennial reign of Christ. I accept it because it’s what the plain sense of Scripture teaches. But for the life of me, I can’t see the point of a 1,000 year earthly reign of Christ.” My now post-trib student had come to view theology through the soterio-centric glasses of reformed theology (I think Moo actually refers to his position as “Modified Lutheranism,” rather than reformed). And from a salvation based theology, why *should* there be a millennium, once Christ has come to effect His great plan of redemption through His cross work? I relate this incident, because it illustrates the essential difference in how a reformed theologian views God’s working in the world and how a dispensational theologian views God’s working in the world. To the reformed theologian, everything revolves around God’s redemptive program and the outworking of the Covenant of Grace, and there is no real need for a millennium. But the dispensational theologian understands that God has many purposes in His creation, all leading to the glory of God. For the dispensationalist, God is doing much more than bringing about salvation for the elect. The dispensationalist comprehends that God is working in order to administer all His purposes. These purposes include not only the salvation of the elect, but also his plans for the angels, the family, the nations, and Israel. One of the great characteristics of dispensational theology is this ability to think *administratively*. The dispensations (i.e., *administrations*) are the means by which God *administers* His purposes in the world.¹ So much of the Bible’s message does deal with soteriology, that it is tempting to think that the Bible’s central message is soteriological. And, to be sure, soteriology is a great theme, maybe even the greatest theme, in the Bible. But it is not the only theme in the Bible.

A great deal of confusion exists today about how the church relates prophetically to Israel. Is the church the NT extension of Israel? Does the church replace Israel in God’s program? Is the church the *true* Israel? A growing number of Christians today believe that there is no real Biblical reason for Christians to be supportive of the nation of Israel or to view the Jewish people as having any special place in God’s prophetic future.

¹ Covenant theologians also speak of the “dispensations” of God. But in their theological scheme, the dispensations are merely ways in which God administers the Covenant of Grace. For the dispensational theologian, this is too limited a scope for explaining much of Scripture.

Just for the record, I believe that we *should* be supportive of the nation of Israel, and that the Jewish people *do* have a special place in God's prophetic future. And this is based in large part upon what I believe about how the church relates prophetically to Israel.

Is this important? Yes. I believe it is tremendously important. First, because of the promise in the Abrahamic Covenant that God will bless those who bless the chosen descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Second, because getting this right, is the only way to understand correctly the meaning of the blessed hope, the expectation that Christ could appear at any moment to take us to the Father's House. Third, because it adequately explains why there must be an earthly millennial reign of Christ.

Romans 11:17 ("You ... were grafted in among them") is widely misquoted and misunderstood resulting in a faulty understanding of the relationship between Israel and the church. Romans 11:11-24 speaks about God's faithfulness to His promises. It is given as both an encouragement to believing Jews and a caution to believing Gentiles not to despise the Jews. There is also an important practical application from this passage: If God is faithful to His promises to Israel, then we should not lose heart in thinking that he will fail in any way to fulfill His promises to us. Faulty conclusions about the meaning of Romans 11:17 include the following: "A transfer of covenant privileges from Israel to the church."² "Gentile Christians must remember that they are grafted into a Jewish faith, and that when they are grafted into the Old Testament people of God, they accept not only Israel's spiritual history as their own but also Jews as in some sense their siblings...."³

1 Romans 9-11 Dispensational, not soteriological

In the Book of Romans, chapters 9-11 hold a unique position. They stand in marked contrast to the preceding chapters (3-8). Chapters 9-11 describe how God administers His affairs in the world in relation to national Israel; chapters 3-8 discuss soteriological issues. Most reformed theologians, influenced by covenant theology, fail to appreciate the uniqueness of these chapters because of reformed theology's soterio-centric focus. Admittedly, soteriology is a major topic within the Book of Romans. However, responsible exegesis should not presume any topic for a specific passage until such a topic is derived from the context. Chapter 9 of Romans introduces a major discourse shift in the book, evidenced by the list of benefits to Israel found in Romans 9:4-5. These verses resume a discussion that Paul had begun in 3:1-2. In chapters 1-2, Paul establishes the universal condemnation of all mankind – chapter 1: the condemnation of the Gentile world, chapter 2: the condemnation of the Jews. But this prompts a question that Paul addresses at the beginning of chapter 3. If there is no difference in the condemnation of Jews and Gentiles, what, then, is the advantage of the Jew (3:1)? In verse 2, Paul begins to answer this question, but he digresses before he finishes the answer. Note that he uses two adjectives to describe his answer, "*Much* (πολύς) in every way, for *first* (πρῶτος) the oracles of God were entrusted to them." The ordinal numeral "first" implies that there should be at least a "second" advantage in an enumerated list. Also, the adjective "much" implies that there should be more than just one advantage listed. However, Paul only lists one advantage of the Jews, namely that

² D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 392.

³ Craig S. Keener and InterVarsity Press, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Ro 11:9.

they were entrusted with God's special revelation (λογία τοῦ θεοῦ). What comes next in the Book of Romans, may be considered a very lengthy digression in the remainder of chapter 3 through then end of chapter 8, in which Paul discusses soteriological matters. This is the answer to the plight of humanity introduced in chapters 1-2. But once he has concluded this lengthy soteriological section, Paul, in 9:4-5, resumes his answer to the question of Israel's advantage, and he completes the list he had begun in 3:1-2. In all, Paul's list of advantages to the Jews consists of nine features.

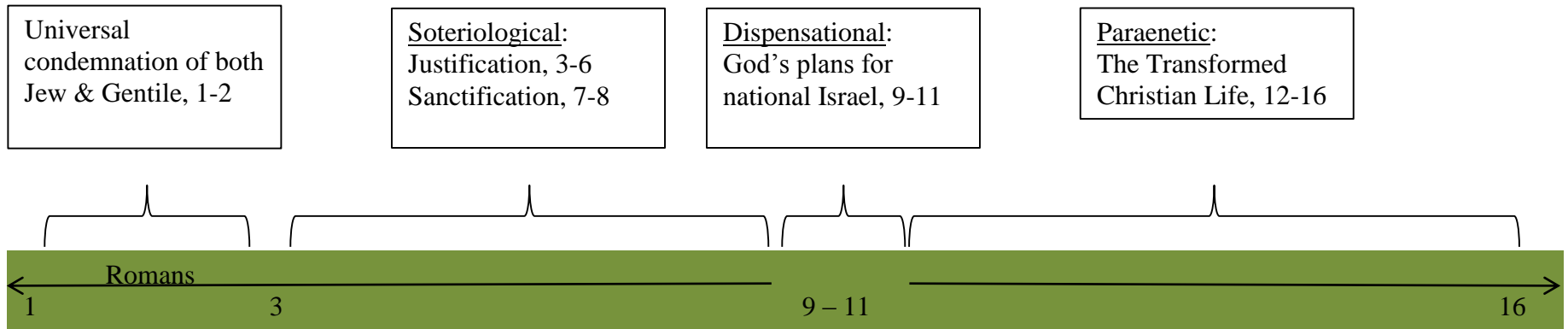
1. Scripture, 3:2
2. The Adoption, 9:4
3. The Glory
4. The Covenants
5. The Law
6. Temple Service
7. The Promises
8. The Forefathers, 9:5
9. The Messiah

It should be noted that, while some of these nine features touch on soteriological themes, they are not *all* soteriological in nature. For example, the fact that Israel was entrusted with the Scriptures does not demand that Israel is a "saved" nation; much of the content of the "covenants" has to do with nations, geographical boundaries, dynastic privilege, etc.; much of the "law" deals with civil statutes and personal relationships not directly related to salvation; and possession of the "forefathers" in one's ancestry most certainly has nothing to do with salvation (see John 1:13). Rather, it is better to view these nine features as *administrative* (i.e. dispensational) advantages for Israel. They describe the administrative privileges given to national Israel as God's appointed mediatorial agent in the world. This introduces the theme of chapters 9-11 as an administrative/dispensational theme, rather than a soteriological one,⁴ and is crucial to one's proper understanding of the Olive Tree metaphor in chapter 11.

The way this fits in with the overall structure of Romans may be diagrammed as follows:

⁴ Moo comes close to seeing this when he observes, "Paul is thinking mainly in terms of corporate bodies, not in terms of individuals within those bodies." Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 686.

Layout of Romans



What Advantage has the Jew? (3:1)

#1 Scripture, 3:2

Advantages of the Jews cont'd. (9:4-5)

- #2 The Adoption
- #3 The Glory
- #4 The Covenants
- #5 The Law
- #6 Temple Service
- #7 The Promises
- #8 The Forefathers
- #9 The Messiah

These 9 advantages are primarily administrative, not soteriological.

Think of the world as God's household. God manages His household through certain appointed administrators. Some of these have been: Adam, Seth, Noah, Abraham, and the nation of Israel. Today, He is administering His affairs in the world through the Church. The way He administers the world includes salvation, but involves much more than just salvation.

2 Outline of Romans Chapter 11

Not only is it important to establish the broad context of chapters 9-11, but we must also set the Olive Tree metaphor in its nearer context of chapter 11. The chapter may be viewed under three headings:

2.1 The Remnant of Israel, 1-10

The first ten verses discuss the question of the remnant of Israel. An important subtheme running throughout the epistle to the Romans is to address the question of what has become of Israel in light of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. In this respect Romans is somewhat parallel to the Gospel of Matthew. Paul's argument in Romans 11:1-10 is that ever since God chose the descendants of Abraham as His special people, He has always maintained a remnant of faithful Israelites in the world, even in times of great national apostasy. Like the 7,000 remnant Israelites in Elijah's day, Paul (and the other apostles) represented a believing remnant at the time Romans was written. This is given as evidence that God is not finished with national Israel; there is still hope for a future restoration of the nation.

2.2 Gentile attitude towards Israel, 11-24

Verses 11-24 comprise the section in which the Olive Tree metaphor occurs. In this section, Paul addresses believing Gentiles with respect to how they should view Israel, in light of their rejection of the Messiah. His argument is that Gentiles have benefited greatly through Israel's rejection of Messiah; therefore, they should not despise the Jew, but rather, love them enough to seek their salvation. See below for further development of this section.

2.3 Future restoration of national Israel, 25-36

In this closing section of chapter 11, Paul argues that Israel will be regathered as a nation when the "fullness of the Gentiles" comes (ver. 25). At that time the Deliverer (Messiah) will come to Zion in Jerusalem (ver. 26) and fulfill the New Covenant (ver. 27) resulting in national restoration in conjunction with the forgiveness of their sins. Paul bases his argument for the future restoration of Israel on several OT passages, including Isaiah 27:9; 59:20-21; and Jeremiah 31:33-34, having already alluded to this theme in the previous section (verses 11-24) by referring to other OT passages (see below).

3 The argument of 11:11-24

3.1 Israel's fall has had 2 positive results, 11-12

That some tension existed between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman congregation seems evident (see Rom. 3:29; 9:24; 11:18, 20). This may be related to the historical circumstance of Claudius' having expelled the Jews from Rome and the subsequent return of Jewish believers to the congregation.⁵ Whatever the cause, Paul cautions believing Gentiles against harboring negative opinions of Jews. Ideally, they were united in Christ, but experientially, former

⁵ According to Ambrosiaster (4th century) the church was not founded by an apostle, but rather by a group of Jewish Christians, but by the time Paul wrote the epistle, probably during the winter of AD 56-57, there appear to have been many believers of both Jewish and Gentile background (Rom. 16). Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome occurred ca. AD 49-50.

hostilities may have persisted. Some degree of anti-Semitism appears to have existed among believing Gentiles – if not toward believing Jews, certainly toward the bulk of Jews who remained in unbelief. In this passage, Paul exhorted the believing Gentiles not to harbor anti-Semitic attitudes towards unbelieving national Israel (Rom. 11:18). Instead, believing Gentiles were to view national Israel as God’s sanctified people who were serving an important role in the outworking of God’s purposes in the world. Paul developed this exhortation by pursuing two lines of argumentation: (1) Israel’s unbelief was a temporary stumble that resulted in great blessing for the Gentile world, but national Israel will eventually recover from their stumble and will yet receive the fulfillment of God’s covenants and promises that were made to the forefathers, verses 11-12; (2) Israel was, and will remain, a holy nation, a remnant of which will always believe, and ultimately, the entire nation will be saved, verses 13-24.

As Paul developed the first part of his argument (vv. 11-12), he explained first, that two positive things resulted from Israel’s “stumble”: (1) salvation has come to the Gentiles, v. 11a.⁶ (2) Israel itself will be provoked to jealousy over the Gentiles’ receiving of such blessing, v. 11b. This provoking to jealousy will eventually lead to national Israel’s fulfilling of the covenants and promises made to the forefathers, v. 12, including not only the forgiveness of sins under the New Covenant (Jer. 31:34) but also possession of all the land within the geographical boundaries established in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:8), and the reign of the Messiah on the Davidic throne in Jerusalem (2 Sam 7:12-17; Psa. 89:3-4,19-37).

3.2 Gentile believers need to be concerned about Israel’s future well-being, 13-14

Paul then directly addressed the anti-Semitic attitude of the Gentile believers as he spoke to them directly in verse 13 (“But I say to you Gentiles...”). A substantial part of the motivation for Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles was that by his Gentile outreach, he may in fact move Israel to the point of jealousy, so that in this day of temporary national rejection some of them may be saved, v. 14.

3.3 Three illustrations of Israel’s future restoration, 15-24

Beginning in verse 15, Paul employed three illustrations of how all of national Israel will eventually be restored, coming to faith in the Messiah.

3.3.1 Ezekiel’s dry bone vision (Ezek. 37:1-14), 15

The first illustration came from Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14).⁷ Paul referred to this prophecy by the succinct expression “life from the dead” (v. 15).⁸

⁶ In most Reformation and Post-Reformation conservative Christian writings, the term “salvation” carries with it a rather broad semantic weight. But one should not assume that in the early days of the Christian church, when the Apostle Paul penned his epistles, the term σωτηρία carried entirely the same semantic weight. The major theme of this passage is dispensational and constitutes an explanation of how Israel figures into God’s administration in light of their rejection of Christ. Israel’s future “salvation” will include both the forgiveness of their sins (Jer. 31:34) and a restoration to the privileges associated with being God’s principal mediators. So, too, for “salvation” to come to the Gentiles, as in the present verse, means more than merely the forgiveness of their sins; it includes their being “grafted in” to the position of mediatorial administrative responsibility and privilege.

⁷ Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier. *Romans*. Holman New Testament Commentary, Vol. 6, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 341. The exact phrase ζῶη ἐκ νεκρῶν does not occur anywhere in the LXX. In fact the two words ζῶη and νεκρός occur together in the same verse in only 2 verses in the canonical LXX, Ecclesiastes 9:3 and Isaiah 26:14 neither of which provides a reference for Paul’s statement in Romans 11:15 (The

What Ezekiel foresaw will yet come to pass; spiritually dead Israel will one day have the breath of God breathed into it, and all Israel will be saved. This will result in national restoration with a resurrected David serving as prince over Israel (Ezek. 37:24) within the geographical boundaries promised in the Abrahamic Covenant (Ezek. 37:25) and Israel exalted among the Gentile nations with God's temple in her midst (Ezek. 37:26-28).

3.3.2 *Firstfruit of bread dough presented in the temple (Num. 15:20-21), 16a*

The second illustration was put forth in verse 16a. The illustration is from the Pentecost loaves presented to the priests in the temple (Num. 15:17-21; also Deut. 26).⁹ At Pentecost (*Shavu'ot*) a small portion of a lump of wheat dough was pinched off, formed into a loaf, baked and presented to the priests. Paul's argument is that national Israel, despite their current unbelief, is still to be considered "holy." In Paul's analogy, the "first fruits" that are offered to the priests in the temple are like the remnant of believing Israelites; whereas the lump of dough from which the first fruits was taken are like the whole of the nation of Israel. The entire lump is considered "holy" because of the holiness of the first fruits. Thus, national Israel, though presently in unbelief, is still to be considered "holy," that is, set apart to God. God still has a specific plan for national Israel; He is not finished with them yet.

3.3.3 *The Olive Tree, 16b-24*

The third illustration received the most attention of the three and encompassed verses 16b-24. This was an illustration involving an olive tree. Three parts of this olive tree are distinguished from each other: the branches, representing national Israel; olive shoots grafted in from a wild tree, representing believing Gentiles; the root or lower portion of the tree, representing the position of privilege and administrative responsibility into which God places his mediatorial representatives on the earth. Unbelieving national Israel was described as branches that had been broken off (vv. 17-18). God had removed national Israel from the privileged place of being used as God's mediatorial agent in the world. Some of the original branches, however, remained; these were the remnant of Jews who believed in the Messiah and were subsequently incorporated into the church. Where national Israel was once in the place of mediatorial responsibility, God had now placed believing Gentiles. These believing Gentiles, along with the remaining original branches, were also incorporated into the church. While national Israel had

two words also occur together in Odes 5:14; Sirach 22:11, 12). But the two terms can both be found in close proximity in Ezekiel 37:5,9.

⁸ That the specific "loss" (*ἀποβολή*) referred to in this verse signifies a loss of administrative privilege finds an interesting parallel in Josephus' use of this same term in Ant. 4.313-314. According to Josephus, what Israel loses through unbelief and disobedience includes: (1) loss of the land; (2) loss of the temple; (3) loss of personal dignity. One might add that Israel loses its position as God's representative, mediatorial agent in the world.

⁹ The "first fruit" has been given at least three different interpretations: 1. The Patriarchs (Chrysostom, Calvin, Sanday and Headlam, Lagrange, Michel, Morris, Murray, Käsemann, Schlier) 2. Christ (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Gennadius) 3. Remnant (i.e. believing) Jews. The primary argument in favor of the first view is the belief that the "first fruit" should correspond with the "root" of the following illustration. This argument fails on two counts: First, because there is no reason that there should be a correspondence; they are two separate illustrations, the parts of which do not necessarily correspond to each other. Second, because *ἀπαρχή* is an obvious reference to the Jewish remnant, just as Paul had used the term to refer to the first Gentile believers of both Asia and Achaia (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15). The second view is based on a faulty parallel seen with 1 Corinthians 15:20. The third view corresponds best with the context, especially "since Paul has spoken of the *λεῖμμα κατ' ἐκλογὴν χάριτος* in vv. 1-10" (Cranfield, *Romans*, 564).

been removed from the place of mediatorial responsibility, the church (composed of believing Jews and Gentiles) was now occupying that place.

This privileged position for believing Gentiles was not to become a cause of arrogance (vv. 18-22), for they had achieved this position, not by their own efforts or good works; rather, they stood by faith (v. 20). In fact, Gentiles would not hold this position in perpetuity; rather, God will one day remove the Gentiles from the position of mediatorial responsibility (vv. 21, 22) and place national Israel back into that position (v. 23-24).

4 What is the root?

Paul speaks of a “root” in which the engrafted branches partake of nourishing fatness. It is ultimately the identification of this “root” that constitutes the primary difficulty in interpreting this passage. The word “root” (ρίζα) is found in Greek from the time of Homer (VIII BC) and refers literally to the root of a tree or plant. While it may refer to the portion of the tree or plant that remains underground, it may also refer to “that which grows from a root,”¹⁰ the portion of the tree or plant that is nearest the ground (lower trunk), that into which a grafting may be placed. For example Isaiah 53:2 refers to a “root out of dry ground” (שִׁרְיָ מֵמַאֲרָץ צִיָּה) for which the LXX translators put ρίζα ἐν γῆ̃ διψώσῃ (“a root in a thirsty ground”). In Isaiah’s figure, this ρίζα refers to “the suckling, i.e., (in a horticultural sense) the tender twig which sucks up its nourishment from the root and stem.”¹¹ In Romans 11:16-17, it clearly refers to the lower portion of the tree, that is, the trunk from which branches grow and into which shoots maybe grafted.

- The root cannot represent the Patriarchs,¹² for Israel has not been broken off from the Patriarchs, as Romans 9:5 makes clear. Furthermore, while it may be admitted that believing Gentiles are “sons of Abraham” (Gal 3:7), they are not similarly related to Isaac and Jacob.¹³
- The root cannot represent the covenants, for Paul has before established that the covenants are Israel’s (Rom. 9:4). It is inconceivable that Paul would here state that Israel had been cut off from the covenants.
- The root cannot represent salvation, for national Israel was connected with the root prior to Christ’s first advent, yet clearly Israel was not yet saved.
- The root cannot represent “Israel,” for Israel has been broken off from the root.

¹⁰BDAG, 906.

¹¹Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), Is 53:2.

¹²According to Cranfield this is the majority opinion (p. 565). Darby, in his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, identified Abraham as the root, though later in the same chapter he referred to the root as “the place of blessing”; see further on footnote 14 below.

¹³Morris appears to have seen this weakness in the argument, so he adds the parenthetical remark, “perhaps he means only Abraham” (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 411). But it is still true that Paul, according to Romans 9:5, did not regard Israel as broken off from Abraham.

- The root cannot represent “Christ,” since Israel was connected with the root prior to Christ’s first advent, yet national Israel throughout the Law dispensation could hardly be described as being “in Christ.”

There is a relationship between the salvation of Israel and their being grafted back into the position of mediatorial administrative responsibility. National salvation by means of the New Covenant is a prerequisite to Israel’s engrafting (Jer. 31:33-34), but the soteriological theme is secondary to the dispensational (i.e. administrative) theme in this passage. The “root,” then, is best seen as representing the place of mediatorial administrative responsibility.¹⁴ National Israel occupied that place of mediatorial responsibility before the first advent. At their rejection of Jesus, the nation was broken off from that position, and in their place, Gentiles of the church have been grafted in, alongside of those remnant Jews (the branches that were not broken off) who believe in Jesus and are thus incorporated into the church.

5 “breaking off” of the natural branches, verse 17

This “breaking off” is different from the “cutting off” (ἐκκόπτω) of Gentiles mentioned in verses 22 and 24, a distinction observed in nearly every major English translation.¹⁵ Israel was broken off violently as a result of their unbelief. Paul may have had in mind Jeremiah 11:16 which uses the figure of breaking off¹⁶ olive branches as a symbol for God’s judgment against Israel.¹⁷ This violent breaking off may even be somewhat prophetic of the future woes to be experienced by Israel in the destruction of the temple and subsequent scattering of the nation and generations of turmoil and persecution. It is not certain that Paul had these things in mind, but he certainly may have understood these things based on Moses’ prediction of Deuteronomy 28-29 and on Jesus’ Olivet Discourse in Luke 21. Moo fails to grasp the significance of the difference between ἐκκλάω and ἐκκόπτω when he refers to Israel’s having been “cut off.”¹⁸ That this breaking off is temporary is clearly spelled out in verse 23 making Moo’s following statement perplexing: “... branches, whether Jewish or Gentile, that do not remain attached to that tree are doomed to wither and die.”¹⁹ If it is argued that Israel now “dead” will be raised to life (as in v. 15), then what of verse 22 which speaks of a future cutting off of the Gentiles? The attempt to

¹⁴ Darby referred to it as “the place of blessing” (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, Rom. 11; so also Scofield). The term “blessing” is an inexact term and may mean many things. But I think that Darby was essentially in agreement with the view taken in this paper. The specific “blessing” he referred to in this context was clearly “not by the gospel” (i.e., not soteriological). Speaking of administrative responsibility, Darby comments, “the enjoyment of privileges by position makes us responsible for them, without saying the individual was born again” (Ibid.).

¹⁵ The one exception is American Bible Society’s *Good New Translation*, which translates both as “break.”

¹⁶ רעע may represent either of two separate linguistic roots. רעע I meaning “to be bad, spoiled;” רעע II meaning “to smash, shatter, break.” Translations and expositors differ as to which is meant in Jer. 16:11. But “break” collocates well with “branches,” and may be the better choice. If so, then this provides a suitable Old Testament reference for Paul’s figure.

¹⁷ Joseph Shulam and Hilary Le Cornu, *A Commentary on the Jewish Roots of Romans* (Baltimore: Messianic Jewish Publishers, 1997), 372.

¹⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 701. Even the TNIV, of whose translation committee Moo was a member, preserves the distinction between “break” and “cut.”

¹⁹ Ibid. 704.

understand this metaphor from a soteriological (i.e., Covenant Theology) perspective leads to great difficulty and probable Arminian implications.

Paul highlights the difference between Jew and Gentile by portraying them in his metaphor as branches that are “according to nature” (κατὰ φύσιν), verses 21, 24, and “contrary to nature” (παρὰ φύσιν), verse 24. The preposition κατὰ (“according to”), when used with an accusative object, occurs 399 times in the New Testament. It frequently has either a spatial reference (“along, over, through, in, upon,” etc.) or temporal reference (“at, on, during”). Here, it has neither spatial nor temporal reference but signifies a relationship (“with respect to, in relation to, according to”) similar to its use in the phrase “according to the flesh” in Romans 1:3; 4:1; 9:3, 5. BDAG suggests that here in Romans 11:21 translating the phrase as “in line with,” or “in accordance with” would sound somehow “cumbersome” and that a better translation would be to render it as an adjective, “the natural branches.”²⁰ This, however, misses the point. To be sure, in Paul’s figure they are natural branches, but so are the wild olive shoots that are grafted into the tree. Paul’s point is that these branches that were broken off are of a different nature than the wild olive shoots. To say that these branches are “according to nature” (κατὰ φύσιν) signifies that they correspond to the nature of the cultivated olive tree. The term “nature” (φύσις) is attested in Greek from the time of Homer (VIII BC). In classical Greek this term had reference to the “natural qualities, powers, constitution, condition, of a person or thing.”²¹ To translate this merely as “nature” in English may produce an erroneous connotation, unless it is coupled with a limiting phrase such as “nature of the cultivated olive tree.” It is not “natural” as opposed to “synthetic,” neither is it “nature” as opposed to an urban setting.” Rather, it has reference here to the innate qualities of the cultivated olive tree. This is not quite the same as saying that they are “natural branches.” The point is that national Israel has been constituted by God in such a way as to make them better suited to function as His mediatorial representatives than the Gentiles are. This notion goes back to Paul’s nine-fold list of advantages to the Jew in 3:2; 9:4-5.

The preposition παρά (“contrary to”) is used with all three oblique cases and has a very wide semantic range in all three of these cases. When used with an accusative object, παρά may refer to (1) a physical position “by, along, at the edge of, by the side of, near, on;” (2) time “during, from;” (3) comparative advantage “in comparison to, more than, beyond;” (4) degree that falls short in comparison “except for, almost;” (5) causality “because of;” (6) that which does not correspond to what is expected “against, contrary to;” (7) that which is less “less.” Here in Romans 11:24 it is used in the sixth meaning above, “against, contrary to,” as also in the following:

- Romans 1:26 παρὰ φύσιν “contrary to nature”
- Romans 4:18 παρ’ ἐλπίδα “contrary to hope”
- Romans 6:17 παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν “contrary to the teaching”
- Acts 18:13 παρὰ τὸν νόμον “contrary to the law”
- Gal 1:8 παρ’ ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα ὑμῖν “contrary to what we preached to you”

²⁰ BDAG, 513.

²¹ H.G. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 876.

The contrast between παρά and κατά is an intended word-play to show the inherent suitability of the Jews for the position in the world as God’s mediators. Though broken off for now, they must one day be grafted back in to the place of administrative responsibility for which they are well suited. This will take place during the millennial kingdom.

6 Engrafting of the wild branches, verses 17&19

“Wild olive branches” (ἀγριέλαιος) may be either an adjective or a noun. Both are attested from the fourth to third centuries BC (the adjective in Theocritus, the noun in Theophrastos). As a noun it refers to the wild olive tree, a compound of ἄγριος “wild,” “uncontrolled,” “growing in the open field” (cp. ἀγρός “field,” “countryside”) and ἐλαία “an olive tree.” Here it appears to be used as an adjective. In the New Testament the term occurs only in this passage (vv. 17, 24). It does not occur in the LXX. This passage uses three distinct terms to refer to olive trees (1) ἀγριέλαιος verses 17 and 24, “the wild olive tree;” (2) ἐλαία in verses 17 and 24, a generic term for any olive tree; and (3) καλλιέλαιος in verse 24, “the cultivated olive tree.”

Horticulturally, what is described here is contrary to normal practice. The normal practice would be to graft a cultivated shoot into a wild olive tree. The wild olive root would be naturally more resistant to diseases and pests, while the cultivated shoot would bear the better fruit. One should be cautious about reading too much into the imagery here. However, the context does build on the image of the ἀγριέλαιος, describing these branches as grafted in κατὰ φύσιν (“contrary to nature”). The Gentiles by nature had their own “home-grown” civilization, government, law, and administration; however, they had never been in the place of mediatorial responsibility in the administration of God’s affairs in the world; they had never been instructed by God’s supernatural revelation. Their history had not prepared them for this position. The later negative influence of Greek philosophy on the fourth century church illustrates the inherent dangers associated with grafting these wild olive shoots into the cultivated tree.

7 “Cutting off” of the Gentiles, verses 21-22

The reason the Gentiles were not to boast about their own position as God’s mediatorial agents in the world, is expressed in verse 21, namely, that God would one day remove them from that position and restore national Israel as His mediatorial agent in the world.

The expression “lest perhaps” (μή πως/μήπως²²) in verse 21 is missing from the most reliable Alexandrian manuscripts (ⲛ A B C 81 1739 and many others). However, its inclusion in p⁴⁶, as well as in other manuscripts (many Byzantine), has been influential in convincing modern editors to include this reading in standard Greek texts (USB⁴ and NA²⁷ include the reading in square brackets). Manuscript p⁴⁶, part of the Chester Beatty collection, likely dates from the mid-second to mid-third centuries. All three major versions of the *Textus Receptus* (Stephens 1550, Elzevir 1624, Scrivener 1881) join μήπως with the aorist subjunctive φεισῆται (“lest he spare”), resulting in the AV translation, “*take heed* lest he also spare not thee.” This requires the editorial

²² μή πως (μήπως) in use from the time of Homer (VIII BC) tends to denote a sense of doubt and may be translated into English by “perhaps.” When joined with a verb of apprehension (such as φοβεῖσθαι or βλέπετε) it takes on the sense of “lest,” BDAG, 901.

addition of a main verb “take heed” which has resulted in a traditional interpretation of this verse that takes it as a warning that the addressees may be in danger of losing God’s favor. The Byzantine majority text, however, agrees with the Alexandrian reading of the future indicative φείσεται (“he will [not] spare”). If the future indicative is allowed to stand, then the verse is merely predictive of a future event, rather than a warning of dire consequences. Whether or not μή πως (μήπως) is genuine, the textual evidence is quite conclusive that it is coupled with a future indicative, not an aorist subjunctive. The counterpart to the prediction of the Gentiles’ being cut off is the prediction that the Jews will be grafted back in again (ver. 24, ἐγκεντρισθήσονται).

φείδομαι (“spare”) is attested from the time of Homer (VIII BC). Though this term may mean “to spare” in the sense of “to rescue from danger” (as in to spare in a time of war), it can also mean merely to retain in the same status quo, with no implication of impending danger (cp. the cognate adverb φειδομένως “sparingly”). This verb does not necessarily connote an idea of impending danger. Such an idea comes from the *Textus Receptus*’ reading of the aorist subjunctive, rather than the future indicative, and may be influenced by the presence of μήπως; see discussion above. When a primarily soteriological context is presumed here and the combination of μήπως with an aorist subjunctive is read, this verse takes on a warning about loss of salvation that sounds very Arminian, leading Moo to state, “... if God so judged the Jews, who had a natural connection to the tree and its sustaining root, he will surely judge those who have been grafted in as alien branches.”²³ However, the context is not primarily soteriological. At issue here is not one’s salvation, but rather one’s position as God’s mediatorial representative on the earth. When national Israel was “broken off” (vv. 17-18) they did not experience a loss of salvation, for they were already in a non-regenerate condition. Their being broken off consisted in their being removed from a position of representative mediatorial responsibility in the administration of God’s affairs on the earth. Likewise, οὐδὲ φείσεται here signifies that God will not retain the Gentiles in their place of mediatorial responsibility either. A time will come when national Israel will be grafted back in. At that time, the Gentiles will be removed from that position, possibly via a pretribulational rapture that removes them from the earth.

Similarly, in verse 22, “those who fell” should not be understood in a soteriological sense. Expositors who bring to this passage a preunderstanding of a soteriological theme (as opposed to a dispensational one) become mired in inconsistencies. For example, Morris states with regard to πεσόντας,

In verse 11 Paul denied that Israel’s stumbling was in order that they might fall, and he has the same verb here. But there he was denying that ultimate disaster was the fate of God’s Israel; here he is affirming that it is the fate of those branches that were cut off on account of unbelief (v. 20). Those who shut themselves up to unbelief can look forward to nothing but severity.²⁴

By presuming that the “fall” here refers to soteriological effects Morris is forced to find two different meanings between verses 11 and 22. But this inconsistency is avoided when one

²³ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 706. Moo does not describe what sort of “judgment” will be visited against “those who have been grafted in,” but Paul’s clear statement is that “there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

²⁴ Morris, *Romans*, 416.

understands the “fall” to refer to a fall from mediatorial administrative responsibility and privilege.

The “kindness” of God (χρηστότης) referred to in verse 22 should also be understood in the dispensational context of the passage. Attested from the time of Euripides (V BC). This term appears to be derived from the cognate χρηστός (from Homer VIII BC) “useful, beneficial.” χρηστότης occurs ten times in the New Testament, all in Paul. The LXX uses it 26 times, 17 in the canonical books of Esther and Psalms, the other nine in 1 Esdras (once), Odes of Solomon (once) and Psalms of Solomon (seven times). The original idea of “usefulness, profitableness” has become something more like “goodness, kindness, generosity” by the Hellenistic era. The specific “kindness” (“beneficence”?) in view here should not be understood in a soteriological sense. Though it is true that these believing Gentiles had been justified by faith, the issue here is the privilege that accompanies the responsibility of being God’s mediatorial agent. Thus, to be engrafted or to be cut off is not a matter of being saved or lost. It is a matter of God’s kindness in the present age that believing Gentiles are serving as His mediatorial agents. But if, at some future point, these Gentiles are to be removed from that position, this does not mean that they will lose their salvation, only that they will be removed from their position of mediatorial agency in the world.

The conjunction ἐπεὶ (“since”) introduces the last clause of verse 22 as a causal clause expressing the reason for the uncertainty about the believing Gentiles remaining in the position of God’s goodness (χρηστότης). Attested from the time of Homer (VIII BC), ἐπεὶ was used in Classical Greek in either a temporal or causal sense. In the New Testament there are no instances of its use as a temporal conjunction.²⁵ In the New Testament this conjunction is always causal. Believing Gentiles will not remain in the position of God’s χρηστότης forever because one day God will cut them off from the position of mediatorial responsibility. This will happen at such time as when national Israel is grafted back in to this position. Those who interpret this passage along the lines of a soteriological theme run the danger of coming to Arminian conclusions. For example, Moo states, “... if the believer does not continue in the goodness of God – the believer will, like the Jew, be ‘cut off’ – severed forever from the people of God and eternally condemned.... Salvation is dependent on continuing faith; therefore, the person who ceases to believe forfeits any hope of salvation.”²⁶ This conclusion is so surprising that Moo finds it necessary to issue a lengthy and confusing caveat in a footnote.²⁷ Two kinds of causal clauses may be introduced by ἐπεὶ: (1) directly causal clauses, in which a reason or cause for the preceding clause is given where ἐπεὶ is translated “because, since, for,” such as in Matthew 18:32; 21:46; 27:6; Mark 15:42; Luke 1:34; John 13:29; 19:31; 1 Corinthians 14:12; 2 Corinthians 11:18; 13:3; Hebrews 5:2, 11; 6:13; 9:17; 11:11. (2) Clauses introducing a contraindication where ἐπεὶ is translated “otherwise,” such as in Romans 3:6; 11:6; 1 Corinthians 5:10; 7:14; 14:16; 15:29; Hebrews 9:26; 10:2. All major English translations have understood

²⁵ A variant reading at Luke 7:1 has ἐπεὶ δέ instead of ἐπειδὴ as a temporal expression. But solid manuscript evidence for this reading is lacking, and no major published edition of the Greek New Testament has adopted it.

²⁶ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 706-7. Similarly, Stifler states, “The Gentile is responsible for his conduct, and if he fails to honor God he will fall as did the Jew” (193). These statements, from men who would consider themselves to be Calvinistic in doctrine, are quite amazing.

²⁷ *Ibid.* n. 57.

ἐπεὶ here to introduce a contraindication and translate it as “otherwise.”²⁸ The position taken here is that ἐπεὶ should be understood as directly causal. An analysis of the eight instances of ἐπεὶ as introducing a contraindication reveals that in such instances contraindication is denoted by two characteristics of the grammar:

1. An expression of uncertainty by means of a question, a subjunctive, a verb of volition (e.g. ὀφείλω) or a particle like ἄν. If not uncertainty, then there is the expression of a patently unacceptable result (‘grace is no longer grace,’ ‘your children are unclean’).
2. The implication of some negative to be rejected in the preceding clause.

In Romans 11:22 there is no expression of uncertainty; on the contrary, the verb is a future indicative. It could be argued that ἐκκοπήση (“you will be cut off”) expresses a patently unacceptable result, but only on the assumption that the context is soteriological. It has been argued in this paper that the context is not primarily soteriological, and that the “cutting off” speaks of a dispensational change in the way God administers His affairs in the world. Also, there is no implication of a negative to be rejected in the preceding clause. On the contrary, the preceding clause expresses a positive course of action to which the Gentiles should adhere (“if you remain in His goodness”). For these reasons, the position taken here runs contrary to the major English translations and asserts that ἐπεὶ should be translated “since” or “because.”²⁹

That the Gentiles will be cut off from the root at some future time is inexplicable in soteriological terms, unless one adopts an Arminian soteriology. But understood in dispensational terms, the future cutting off of the Gentiles simply points to a future change in administration. Gentiles must be removed from the place of administrative responsibility before God can reinstate Israel as His administrative agent in the world.

8 Engrafting of Israel, verses 23-24.

The grand culmination of this metaphor is the re-grafting of the “natural” branches into their tree. The present administration of God by the church (a combination of both “natural” and “contrary to nature” branches) is marvelous, indeed, fulfilling the Great Commission, but it is not the fullest possible expression of God’s administration over the earth, since many nations and peoples are not in subjection to the rule of their Creator. Once the branches that are “contrary to nature” have been cut off from the position of administrative responsibility, the natural branches are to be grafted back in, thus reinstating Israel as His administrative agent in the world. This reinstatement of Israel as God’s administrative agent will take place in two stages. First, during the seventieth week of Daniel God’s administration will be carried out by 144,000 sealed Jews (Rev. 7:1-8, 14:1-5), two Jewish prophets announcing God’s Word in Jerusalem (Rev. 11:3-14), and a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem (Dan. 9:27; Matt. 24:15; 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 11:1-2). The second stage will be under the direct kingly rule of Jesus Christ in the millennial kingdom (Matt. 19:28; 25:31; Rev. 20:4,6; Ezek. 20:33-38; 37:21-28; Ps. 110:1,2, 5-7; Isa. 9:7; 24:21-23; 32:1-5;

²⁸ ASV, AV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, NET, NIV, NKJV, NRSV, RSV. So also Cranfield, “The clause is a warning against a false and unevangelical sense of security,” 570.

²⁹ Darby translated it, “since [otherwise],” placing the word “otherwise” in square brackets.

33:17-24; 60:1-22; Jer. 23:5-8; 33:14-26; Dan. 2:44-45; 7:13-14,18,22,27; Hos. 3:5; Obad. 19-21; Mic. 2:12-13; 5:2-4; Zeph. 3:14-20; Zech. 9:9-17; 14:9-21).

For much of the history of the church, it seemed unlikely that Israel would ever be reconstituted as a nation. Like branches long broken off from their tree, who could imagine that such dried up, withered branches could ever be grafted back into their tree and bear fruit? Paul's reply to such a scenario is, "God is able to graft them in again" (verse 23). No doubt, such a human impossibility led most theologians from Augustine (several centuries after Israel's breaking off) to the reformers (a millennium and a half after Israel's breaking off) to prefer an amillennial explanation of God's kingdom.³⁰ It was not until Darby and the following resurgence of Dispensationalism that significant numbers of theologians adopted a consistent, literal interpretation of eschatological portions of Scripture and dared to believe that "God is able to graft them in again."

Conclusion:

The engrafting of the Gentiles referred to in Romans 11:17 is seen by some as support for the view that the Church is somehow involved in a present, spiritual form of Israel's kingdom, wherein Gentiles are being "grafted in" to salvation. This paper has put forth an argument that Romans 11:17 is not referring to a soteriological theme at all. Rather, this verse is referring to the Church's present dispensational position, serving as God's administrative mediator on the earth during the present age, and Israel's future reconstitution as a nation for the millennial reign of Christ. The "root" into which this grafting is taking place is the position of mediatorial responsibility. The entire context of Romans 9-11 is one which describes Israel's relationship to God in terms of dispensational responsibility and participation. To import a soteriological theme into this dispensational context ultimately leads to Arminian conclusions when discussing the "breaking off," "engrafting," and "cutting off" referred to in this passage. However, when seen from a dispensational perspective of discussing mediatorial responsibilities, the "breaking off," "engrafting," and "cutting off" fit neatly, without confusion or contradiction into a premillennial, pretribulational, dispensational view of the progress of the ages.

Today is a great day of opportunity. Jesus Christ is building His Church. It's been under construction for nearly 2,000 years. One day, perhaps soon, the Church will be cut off from its administrative responsibilities on earth and Christ will take His bride to the Father's house. At that time, administrative responsibility will return to Israel. But, just as in the Apostle Peter's day, there are many skeptics today who ask, "Where is the promise of His coming? For, since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue on since the beginning of the creation" (2 Pet. 3:4). One of the reasons for this skepticism in Peter's day, was the apparent failure of God to bring Israel into the kingdom.

2 Peter 3:8-9 says, "But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." The same God who has brought Israel back from captivity to form a modern nation in the world, may soon bring His chosen people of old into the

³⁰ Some notable exceptions from this period of time include such premillennarians as the Donatists, Joachim of Fiore, and the Anabaptists.

New Covenant to establish the millennial reign of Messiah. Before He does that, he will catch the church up to the Father's House as the pure and holy bride of Christ. A great day for the church (cutting off), and a great day for Israel (grafting in)!