

The Remnant Theology

Of Romans 9 -11

Some Thoughts by a Messianic Jew

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Harry L. Ellison was one of the significant scholar-leaders in the last generation whose writings anticipated Messianic Jewish theology. As a lecturer at the University of London, he put forth a view concerning Paul and the Law and Jewish identity which were advanced beyond his own time. I was privileged to correspond with him toward the end of his life and was invited to write an article in a book of articles dedicated in his honor.

Harry Ellison was a lecturer in the Hebrew Bible, produced commentaries and one book that was used in colleges in courses on the prophets. One of his most significant pieces of writing was a little book entitled The Mystery of Israel published in 1966. This book is an exposition of Romans 9-11, and was written in the context of the very recent decisions of The Vatican II Council. Ellison wrote,

More than two thousand bishops at the Ecumenical Council in Rome carried by overwhelming

majorities the Declarations on the attitude of the Church to non-Christian religions and to Religious Liberty. Here we are concerned with. . . the four sections of it that concern the Jews.

On the last clause 2,118 voted. If we assume that this was the total to vote, we get for the section affirming a common Christian-Jewish patrimony, 91 per cent in favor; for exoneration of most Jews in the past and all today for blame in the death of Jesus Christ, 89 percent; for affirming that the Jews are not rejected by God or accursed, 86 per cent; for deploring hatred, persecution, and anti-Semitism 90 per cent. The change of heart in the Roman Catholic Church is very symptomatic of a major change in the Church in general.

Ellison then goes on to develop a theology of Israel and the Church to fit the reality of the new developments in Vatican II where Israel is still God's chosen people. Ellison believed that his theology had to be true to his own identity as a Jewish disciple of Yeshua.

The key to Ellison's view is the development of the doctrine of the remnant. I will summarize this theme of his book and then expand upon it. First, to understand the remnant doctrine, it is necessary to take into account the numerous passages in the Hebrew Scriptures which speak of the remnant. These passages may be seen as both pessimistic and optimistic. Israel, though having become a numerous people as promised, will soon be defeated in awesome wars leading to their captivity. Though Israel was once large in numbers, only a remnant would survive. However, that remnant would return to the land, and Israel from the remnant would again become again a numerous people. This is analogous to the remnant of humanity in Noah's family saved through the flood. In this view of the remnant, pessimism is seen in the fact that the rest of the nation perishes. They are lost. Optimism is found in the fact that at least Israel survives which enables the fulfillment of her divine purpose. We see such a semi pessimistic view of the remnant in the Qumran Community. Their writings repeatedly hold out hope for the deliverance of the remnant only. The true remnant alone will be

saved, and is identified with the Qumran Covenanters (Essenes)? The rest will be destroyed.

However, there is another doctrine in the Hebrew Bible, the doctrine of corporate solidarity. This was summarized in my view in a little book entitled Corporate Personality in the Ancient Israel.¹ Here we find that God's judgment on a whole people can be averted by a righteous remnant. Sodom will not be destroyed if there are a mere handful of righteous men. So Abraham argues with God and God concurs. Moses can intercede and his righteousness can avert the disaster. So James summarizes that the prayer of a righteous man can prevail. It can avert judgment. Intercession works because the intercessor is one with the community. Elijah is comforted by God who informs him that there are yet 7000 who have not bowed the knee to Baal. There is yet hope because of the 7000 though there are hundreds of thousands who have bowed the knee to Baal. Ezekiel notes that evil can come to such a level that the righteous intercessor can no longer keep the community from disaster. Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job were in the land of Israel, it could not be saved from the judgment. Even their relatives would not be saved, such is the level of evil (Ezekiel 16).

It seems clear that Paul is not pessimistic concerning the future of Israel. Is it possible that he is even optimistic about the present? Paul argues that the righteous remnant proves that Israel has not been rejected, and that this remnant sanctifies the nation, the Jewish people, as a whole. The whole nation is still holy because of the righteous remnant. For Paul, the righteous remnant is the contingent of Jewish disciples of Yeshua. Two questions arise from the exposition. Is the righteous remnant only the Jewish followers of Yeshua, or is there a righteous remnant that includes righteous Jews who have not yet come to faith in Yeshua, but are considered righteous on the same basis

in Jewry before the time of the coming of Yeshua? Yes, the preaching of the Good News now makes its claim upon the Jewish people, and those who truly hear are accountable, but is there some flexibility? For Ellison there is a righteous remnant that is first of all the community of Jewish disciples of Yeshua and is secondly the faithful righteous of heart within Israel who have not yet come to faith in Yeshua. These sanctify the whole of Israel, so Israel still counts. The question in view in Romans 9-11 is not the extent of the

i. H. Wheeler Robinson, Cornuarte Personality in Ancient Israel, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1964

salvation of individuals or their eternal destiny. This is a question that can not be answered from Romans 9-11. However, there is in Paul's view a hope that is certainly broader than the parallel Essene hope which limits salvation to the remnant of Essenes alone. The rest of the nation, which has compromised with the corrupt religious system and Temple which was then in control of the nation, will be irrevocably destroyed. Paul as a Pharisee is much more optimistic. "All Israel will be saved." "Though they are enemies of the Gospel" they are, due to election "loved on account of the patriarchs" for God's "gifts and call are irrevocable." (Romans 11 :29) This does open a possibility as well that not only is the nation loved as a whole, but the righteous remnant might be greater than just those who have already professed faith in Yeshua. Indeed, Mark Nanos argues that weaker brothers in Romans 14, those with weaker faith, are those Jewish brothers and sisters who have not yet come to the stronger faith that confesses Yeshua. None other than Krister Stendahl of Harvard finds the thesis of Nanos worth pursuing.²

Ellison thus concludes that Israel as a whole corporate nation is holy, elect and chosen as the people of God. This election is preserved, proven and maintained by a

righteous remnant that first includes Jewish followers of Yeshua but also those righteous within Israel that have not yet confessed Him. The question in Romans 9-11 is as C. H. Dodd and Emil Brunner point out, the destiny of Israel and the nations, not individual salvation.³ The question of individual salvation is something that we can not ultimately judge, but is a matter that each must judge for themselves in the hearing of the Word of God, though we can gain some confidence by the fruits in the lives of individuals. The righteous remnant is the proof that the whole still counts in spite of manifest sins and

² Mark Nanos, [The Mystery of Romans](#), Minneapolis, Minn, Fortress Press, 1996.
failures even by the larger number or by the group as a whole.

In addition, Ellison develops the view that it is the same with the Church as with Israel. Ellison catalogues some of the atrocities done in the name of Christ and under the oversight of the institutional Church. Does this mean the Church is rejected? No, Romans 11 can also be applied to the institutional Church. For indeed, there is a righteous remnant in the Church by which the Church as a whole is holy. Just as with Israel, with regard to the Church, we can not dogmatically judge the salvation of individuals. However, the righteous remnant in the Church makes the Church as a whole still elect and chosen. There is an irrevocable call on the Church, and she will fulfill her destiny. The Church still counts, despite the sordid chapters, for Church history is a record of both glory and shame, to quote Peter Hocken's phrase. The principle of corporate solidarity preserves the Church through the righteous remnant.

Ellison's teaching brings the Jewish follower of Yeshua into a unique place in history, for he is part of both the Church and the Jewish people theologically. He is part of Jewry and potentially the righteous remnant that preserves Israel and enables her to

fulfill her destiny. We say potentially because a Messianic Jew may truly live out his profession of faith with integrity as a true disciple. However, in Paul's view the true Jewish disciples, the Messianic community, is a key to Israel's destiny and sanctifies the whole of Israel.

However, the Messianic Jew is also the Jewish part of the One New Man, a part Of the new congregation in Yeshua made up of Jew and Gentile. So he or she plays a part in the destiny of both institutions, the institution of Israel and the institution of the

3 Emil Brunner, The Letter to the Romans, and C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans, as quoted in Ellison.

Church. The remnant of Israel with regard to the Jewish disciples of Yeshua is of great significance and of value to both.

Of course this view brings into bold relief the challenge that Messianic Jews pose to Christian-Jewish dialogue. Their exclusion at the table is ultimately inauthentic for one who embraces the Pauline viewpoint. The Messianic Jews are the organic bridge between Israel and the Church. They are, as part of the doctrine of corporate solidarity, the reality that connects both together or joins Israel and the Church together on a plain, not of mere distant dialogue, but of corporate reality. There is a corporate solidarity of Israel and the Church together. The Church is not fully itself without the Messianic Jew and Israel is not fully itself without the Messianic Jew. For Israel and the Church are intended to be joined without dissolving the distinct institutional meaning of each.

We do think that Messianic Jewish Congregations are the best way to live out this joining, and of course Ellison wrote before the modern Messianic Jewish movement. For in a Messianic Jewish Congregation a Jew still lives as part of Israel. However, the Messianic Congregation also identifies itself as part of one universal *Kehilah* or *Ekklesia*.

For Ellison, this unique organic connection was lived out by maintaining Jewish connections while living within the context of the church denominations. There were also periodic gatherings of Jewish disciples of Yeshua for mutual encouragement in missions, Alliances and other non Church structures. Jewish life, however, is religious life in community and such a solution has certainly been found to be inadequate.

Some important writers did provide Ellison with support for his views. This included Emil Brunner, who argued that the history of Israel in the present is as much a part of the revelation of God's righteousness as the history Israel in the past. In some larger sense Karl Barth and his son Marcus argue that not only has the Church not replaced Israel, but in some larger sense, that Israel is part of the Church.⁴

AN EXPANSION FROM ROMANS 9-11

We now look more closely at Romans 9-11 to bring out the fact that it is key to a Messianic Jewish point of view and a key to the solution of the relationships of Israel, the Church and the Messianic Jewish Community.

Theirs is the Adoption

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

Before Paul begins any discussion of the remnant, he professes the great pain he suffers because of Israel's failure to embrace Yeshua. He is identified with his people! However, this does not change broad affirmations in the present. Their condition has not caused them to lose their chosen status. They are still sons and still bear divine glory.

The covenants are still theirs. These are not just facts about the past, but the continuing reality of the people. The temple worship still continued in Paul's day and here seems to have continued significance. Did Paul draw the conclusion that the significance of Temple service was tied to the sacrifice of the Messiah? The promises of God still pertain to them and have not been revoked in spite of their failure to believe in Yeshua.

⁴ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, Vol n, 2, Markus Barth, The Broken Wall, Emil Brunner, The Letter to the Romans, as quoted in Ellison.

The end of the section returns to these matters with a ringing statement to the effect that these benefits still belong to Israel and have not been revoked.⁵

An Election within an Election

As Paul continues, however, he makes it clear that the experience of the listed benefits is for the faithful. In God's sovereignty over history, peoples go through various times of greater and lesser honor and dishonor (as pottery vessels have various uses). Those who enter into the benefits and privileges must be children of promise. Within the larger group there is an election that is upon those who are faithful or are the children of promise. I do not believe that Paul is here speaking of personal salvation which is often the emphasis in Calvinistic theology, but is rather speaking of God's sovereign purpose in determining the courses of working out his plan in history with various peoples playing different roles. Now Israel as a people are in a unique position, for they as a whole and as a majority did not enter into the realities of the New Covenant. Just why this is so, and the nature of God's justice in the affairs of nations is far beyond human capacity to

evaluate. We are the clay and God is the potter. We now enter into a situation where there is only a remnant that is faithful. Paul quotes Isaiah in this regard,

Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality. (Romans 9:27,28).

In the Isaiah passage the prophet is putting his hope in those who are remaining after the larger number have been lost to the future of the nation in war, famine, disease and assimilation. Paul's argument is quite different though he quotes the remnant passages. Yes, it is only a remnant that experiences the New Covenant in the Messiah

5 Catechism of the Catholic Church, Liguori, Mo., Liguori Press, 1994. Note that the Catechism refers these passages as having present and continuous meaning, section 839, 840 p. 222, 223.

Yeshua. However, it is not merely this remnant that constitutes the ongoing reality of Israel and its continued chosen status. Rather this is a remnant that is still part of a larger whole that is not rejected. A misreading of these passages has caused many in the history of Christian Theology to argue that the Israel that counts is now only those who follow Yeshua. This new Israel begins with the remnant and now is extended to all who join them in the preaching of the Gospel. In such a view, the Church is the on going meaning of Israel exclusively. A closer attention to Paul's argument shows this to not be the case.⁶

From the human side it is not as though no reasons can be given for Israel's failure to recognize Yeshua. Before such reasons are given, however, we must first acknowledge and rest in the sovereignty of God. The main reason for those who did not enter in is given in 9:31,32 and 10:1-3:

"but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone."

"For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Messiah is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."

After a discussion on the nature of faith, further reasons are given in 10: 16 and 10:21, but in a context that again quotes passages asserting the sovereignty of God in the course of history in 10:19,20.

⁶ Although there are some who argue that the on going meaning of Israel is now the Church, I believe that the majority of exegetes no longer hold this view, but at least hold that Israel's preservation and ingrafting at the end of history is promised and is very significant. This is the case in the Catholic Catechism, sections 673,674. Alfted's Greek New Testament was in the 19th century clear and persuasive in this regard. Other exegetes to be included in this are John Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1965, C. E. B. Cranfield, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans. International Critical Commentary,.Edinburgh: T. T. Clark, 1975; W. D. Davies, Paul and Rabbinic Judaism, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1980. James Dunn, Romans 9-16,.Dallas; Word Publishers, 1988. We have already quoted Barth and Brunner in this regard. The rediscovery of Israel in this regard was common in Puritan exegesis and was reflected in the writings of English, Scottish and American exegetes and was also endorsed by Jonathan Edwards. See Ian Murray, The Puritan Hope,.Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971.

"I will make you envious by those who are not a nation ~ I will make you angry by a nation that has no understanding. I was found by those who did not seek me: I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me (10: 19, 20)

"But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, Lord, who has believed our message?" (10:16)

"But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'" (10:21)

I find the argument in Paul to be very tight, but the points can be missed. There is serious responsibility for those who reject the Good News. Yet this is no surprise to God. Indeed, the quotes in Isaiah not only show precedence in history, and principles by which we can understand what is happening, but they are even predictive of present circumstances. We will see in chapter 11 that being made jealous by those who are not a nation is spoken as a positive mission to Israel rather than Israel merely seeing the loss of

blessing by comparison to other people who have embraced Yeshua. This positive jealousy can cause a turning in repentance. However, at this point we do not yet have Paul's conclusive summary. We do not know with certainty of Israel's status nor of her bright future. This conclusion only comes in Romans 11.

There are Yet Seven Thousand

Paul now makes a ringing assertion and answers the question concerning whether or not God has rejected his people. He answers, "By no means." He asserts his own identity as an Israelite, his descent from Benjamin. God did not reject his people whom He foreknew. However, at this point we could possibly assert that God has not totally rejected his people, but like the Essenes we could say that God has rejected all but the remnant which alone is still in the covenant and fulfills the destiny of Israel. Though I do not think the argument at this point makes this likely, it is still a possibility. The beginning of Romans 9 counts against it, but not conclusively. What is the significance of the seven thousand whom God has reserved for himself and who have not bowed the knee to Baal? (v.4) It is analogous to the fact that a minority at this time has been faithful and has embraced Yeshua. Again this is not surprising to God. There are examples which serve as predictive. Yet we do not know if the remnant is a guarantee for the nation as a whole or simply a group saved out from the nation. My view here is that the passage builds to greater and greater optimism.

The Nation as a Whole Will Fulfill its Intended Glorious Destiny

The argument that follows from Romans 11 is amazing. Israel has not stumbled beyond recovery, but will be accepted as a whole at the end of days. Their transgression has been a cause of Gentile salvation. However, this is not the end of the matter, but salvation in the

nations is to have an effect in making Israel jealous in a positive sense, for there is a fullness to come to Israel that will bring much greater riches. Making Israel jealous is a mission exemplified in the life of Paul. It is based on magnifying the ministry, which I believe is the proving of the presence of God's grace in power and fruit. When Israel is adequately made jealous it will bring life from the dead. This has been variously interpreted to mean spiritual renewal over the whole world, or as the parousia itself. So it is far from over for the rest of the nation that has not embraced Yeshua.

Now Paul begins to show us that the doctrine of the remnant here is not simply hope for that remainder that has embraced the Good News. The principle of corporate solidarity permeates the rest of the argument and is joined to the remnant idea in a new and powerful way. Again, the remnant is primarily the Jewish followers of Yeshua. They are the part of the dough offered as first fruits. Rather than the discarding of the rest of Israel, Paul asserts,

"If part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches."

This is no mere salvation of the remnant, but a remnant still connected to Israel. The election within the election sanctifies and preserves the whole. There is controversy over the meaning of the root. Is the root the patriarchs who are still connected to Israel or is the root the Messiah? It is not pertinent to our argument to settle this issue and a good case can be made for both. However, if the first fruits are the remnant, and the root is Yeshua, then both sanctify Israel as a whole. Yeshua himself is part of Israel and never ceases to be part of the nation as a whole. His very righteousness has to be taken into account as part of the nation. However, many are the promises of Israel's preservation and fulfillment of destiny on the basis of God's commitment to the righteous patriarchs.

Branches Were Broken Off

In an amazing anticipation of the most pessimistic evaluation of the rest of Israel that did not follow Yeshua, Paul is willing to allow, I believe only for arguments sake, that branches were broken off. Who are the broken off branches? Are they the rest of Jewry that does not follow Yeshua or those who are not considered righteous beyond this definition? It is not clear. Paul can even allow that it could be true that branches were broken off and Gentiles were grafted into their place. After a warning against arrogance (they can be broken off) however, Paul now asserts an amazing possibility contrary to agriculture. God is the God of supernatural intervention. He is not limited by the agricultural analogy. The broken off branches can be grafted in if they do not persist in unbelief. This means that they can be preserved though they are broken off!

"How much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!"

This is most remarkable. A branch that has been broken off and spends time away from the tree is not a good candidate for being grafted in. However, with God these branches are indeed the best candidates for grafting in because they fit into the Olive tree like no others, for it is their own olive tree! But will this happen? Paul now goes on to assure us that it indeed will happen.

All Israel Will Be Saved

The hardness of Israel to the Good News is partial and temporary. This situation will only last "until." The remnant proves that it is partial. There will be a time called the "fullness of the Gentiles," where this partial hardening will be at an end. Most

expositors believe that the fullness of the Gentiles refers to the full number that are to respond positively to the Gospel before the *parousia*. However, the point is the same whatever the interpretation concerning the "fullness of the Gentiles." At some future time, "All Israel will be saved." We too easily interpret this in an individualistic way in the West. Paul is rather looking at Israel's day of national salvation as a whole. She as a nation is fully delivered from all her trials, unbelief, and pain. She enters into the fullness of the destiny promised. That destiny includes leading the world to turn and embrace the Good News. For there will not only be a saved remnant from all the nations, but in the *parousia*, the hope of the prophets is that all the nations turn to the God of Israel and His Messiah. (Is. 2, 11,45,65,66, Zech. 14 etc.). I am quite certain that Paul has this in mind.

So now the reader might say that the unbelieving nation has a future hope. However the status of contemporary Israel could be looked at as mostly negative. It could be claimed by some that the present nation has little meaning but that those who are descended from them will recover a meaning in the end of days. However, Paul's doctrine of the remnant stands against this view and claims that the nation as a whole is still holy and still is important in the purposes of God. Even though they may be enemies of the Gospel,

"As far as the election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."

This verse itself is the key to the interpretation of the whole. It is not only the remnant that is elect (an election within an election), but the whole nation is elect even in spite of the part that has not embraced Yeshua. The irrevocable call or the call that is

without repentance is based in the promise and oath taken by God, a promise and oath presented to Abraham. It does not generally apply to every gift and call from God to all persons. The corporate nation as a whole is still God's chosen nation in the earth. They are still his witness people, a people that brings blessing to the earth, and still a testimony to the reality of God, His grace, and his Law. In addition, they are to receive mercy as a result of the Gentiles receiving mercy. For it is God's design to destroy all boasting, and to see that all will know their dependence upon His mercy. In this way, He makes Jew and Gentile interdependent in receiving mercy and intends that the end of it all will be to have mercy upon all (11 :32). Such a plan leads Paul to worship.

It is appropriate here to quote the Catholic Catechism.

The glorious Messiah's coming is suspended at every moment of history until his recognition by "all Israel," for a hardening has come upon part of Israel" in their "unbelief toward Jesus. St. Peter says to the Jews of Jerusalem after Pentecost, "Repent

therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for establishing all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old." St. Paul echoes him: "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead." The "full inclusion" of the Jews in the Messiah's salvation, in the wake of "the full number of Gentiles," will enable the People of God to achieve "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Messiah," in which "God may be all in all." (section 674)

So we can see in this brief paper that Paul's doctrine of the remnant combines the Biblical idea of the righteous representative by which the whole is preserved and saved with the Biblical idea of the remnant. This certainly has application to the institutional Church. In addition, it has enormous implications with regard to the Messianic Jewish Community if in some small sense they are the primary reference to the remnant of Israel

which Paul had in mind. They are the organic reality that ties Israel and the Church together in a common destiny but yet are distinct in function, one a nation among the nations, and the other a saved remnant from all nations that anticipate the day of the redemption of the whole world.