



INTERPRETING

Romans 9-11

by Mark W. Fenison, ThM

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Properly Interpreting Romans 9

Contents

Interpreting Romans 9-11

Three Misinterpretations

The Anticipated Pauline Objector

The Two Olive Trees

Conclusion

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

Interpreting Romans 9-11

The following few pages present a brief summary of significant points of interpretation in regard to Romans 9-11 that are necessary to properly interpret these chapters.

Paul had just taught that the eternal “purpose” of God will be accomplished (Rom. 8:28-39) for His elect (Rom. 8:33) and that nothing will be able to separate the elect (Rom. 8:33) from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:34-39). However, Israel has rejected Christ and Paul has taught that Israel cannot be justified by obedience to the Law of God (Rom. 2:17-3:20). Therefore, Paul anticipates that his Jewish readers will conclude after reading Romans 8:28-39 that God’s election of Israel to all the promises of Abraham has failed. Paul’s response to this objection is found in Romans 9-11. In Romans 9 he clarifies the true meaning of God’s promise of salvation of Israel. He teaches that corporate election to Salvation is based upon individual unconditional election to new birth. In Romans 10 he asserts that the preaching of the gospel is the elected means of salvation for both Jewish and Gentile elect. In Romans 11 he acknowledges the temporary rejection of Israel by God is for a specific reason, but asserts that God’s promise of election of national Israel to ultimate Salvation will be accomplished.

The following defense will deal with three primary points:

1. Three Improper Interpretations of Romans 9-11

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

2. The Anticipated Pauline Objector in Romans 9

3. The Analogy of the Two Olive Trees

I. Three Misinterpretations

There are three major errors committed by Bible Interpreters when attempting to interpret Romans 9-11.

1. Some suppose the “church” instead of national ethnic Israel is the subject of these chapters

2. Some suppose that Romans 9 teaches merely national election to privileges rather than election to actual salvation.

3. Some suppose that Romans 11 teaches that the nation of Israel has been permanently rejected and replaced by the Church as the new “Israel” of God.

Let’s take these three major errors in the order given above.

A. No Church in Romans 9-11

The subject is ethnic national Israel not the church (Rom. 9:1-5; 11:1-4). The term “church” cannot even be found in Romans 9-11. Paul is talking about God’s purpose of election in regard to both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 9:24) and in regard to both Israel, as a nation, and Jews, as individuals. He is talking about the basis

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

(Rom. 9) of election, as well as, the means of saving the elect (Rom. 10), and the fulfillment of election in regard to national Israel in connection with a generational “remnant” of elect Jews during the gentile age (Rom. 11). He speaks about two “trees” but not about the “church.”

Furthermore, the church is restricted within the time frame between the first and second coming of Christ, but election is being considered from Genesis (Rom. 9:7-13; 11:1-4) to Revelation (Rom. 11:25-28). The church was not built nor its foundation laid prior to the earthly ministry of Christ (Mt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20) as the very “first” ministry to be added to the church was not Old Testament prophets but New Testament apostles (1 Cor. 12:28). This fact, totally repudiates the idea of any kind of “church” consisting of all the elect from Genesis to Revelation is under consideration, as no such church exists.

However, Paul is considering God’s elect from Genesis (Rom. 9:1-13; 11:1-6) to Revelation (Rom. 11:25-28). If this was the “church” then Old Testament prophets should have been added “first” in its “foundation” (Eph. 2:20; 1 Cor. 12:28) rather than “apostles”, but they clearly were not. Furthermore, the “foundation” should have been laid in the Old Testament rather than in the New Testament if it were speaking about an all inclusive church, but the “foundation” of the church was not laid until the New Testament Scriptures.

The “church” is not a synonym with the elect or with election but refers only to the New Covenant public “house of God” (1

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

Tim. 3:15; Heb. 9:1) gathered for public worship supervised by a qualified public ministry (1 Tim.. 3:1-13; Heb. 9:1-2) with public qualified ordinances and message that summarizes “the faith once delivered” and defended by the church, making it the “pillar *and ground of the truth*” (1 Tim. 3:15-4:6). The “church” is referred to either in a concrete sense (“churches” or “unto the church which is at...” or in the institutional sense (“the church”).

You cannot find the word “church” in Romans 9-11 simply because this has nothing to do with the “church” which is an institution for service. Romans 9-11 is dealing with God’s eternal purpose of election unto salvation for all the promised seed of Abraham both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 11).

Finally, the future “bride” of Christ does not contain all the elect as there are elect making up the guests at the marriage supper (Rev. 19:8-9) and there are elect “saved nations” living outside the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21:24) rather than inside the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:1-3). So it is impossible to make the “church” synonymous with the elect in the Old Testament, and thus impossible to make it synonymous with the elect of all ages.

The term “Israel” is never once used to describe the “church” in Romans 9-11 or anywhere else in Scripture. Nor is it ever used to describe all the “elect” Jews and Gentiles in Romans 9-11 or anywhere else in scripture.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

In Romans 11, the two olive trees represent the two possible sources from which the professing kingdom of God on earth is constituted. In the Old Testament God primarily called his elect out of cultured tree of Israel. In the New Testament times God has broken off Israel as the primary source from which he calls out His elect. Instead, God has grafted in the gentiles as the primary source from which he calls out His elect. However, after the elect Gentiles are all saved, he will break off the Gentile nations as his primary source of calling out an elect, and graft in again the Jewish nation as the primary source of calling out his elect.

There are three passages that are wrongly attributed to saved Gentiles in Scriptures.

1. Romans 2:28-29

For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart,

In context, Paul begins with the claim by ethnic Jews *“thou art called a Jew”* (Rom. 2:17) based upon their claim they were given the Law and were keepers of the Law, especially the law of circumcision which identified them outwardly with Abraham.

Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God, - Rom. 2:17

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

In Romans 2:18-26 he addresses their claim to be keepers of the Law and shows that claim is false. Then, in Romans 2:27-3:2 he addresses their claim to be “Jews” based upon external circumcision ALONE and shows that external circumcision does not make them true covenant Jews with Abraham.

External circumcision is a “sign” and “seal” (Rom. 4:11) designed by God to indicate inward circumcision of the heart (new birth) and therefore, if a gentile is circumcised in heart, that would be regarded by God as the true meaning of circumcision (Rom. 2:27). A true spiritual ethnic Jew is not merely one who is externally circumcised in the flesh, but is one inwardly circumcised in the heart in addition to the flesh (Rom. 2:28-29).

He is not claiming that born again Gentiles are spiritual Jews, but only claiming that on judgment day outward circumcision does not profit them in their claim to be “Jews” if it is not accompanied with inward circumcision of the heart. On judgment day the circumcised of heart Gentile will be accepted by God while the outward circumcised Jew will be rejected by God. Thus a true “Jew” is one who is not only ethnically born and circumcised, but one who is additionally circumcised in the heart. He is speaking about *spiritual ethnic* Jews, in contrast to *external ethnic* Jews, as he goes right on to consider the question:

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. –

Rom. 3:1-2

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

Circumcision of the heart does not make a Gentile a spiritual Jew, but does make the Gentile spiritually superior and more acceptable to God than a mere external circumcised ethnic Jew. However, if a Jew is both externally and internally circumcised they have more of an advantage than a born again Gentile (Rom. 3:1-2) as circumcision of both the flesh and the heart is the real basis for receiving the Abrahamic covenant blessings to those born of his own loins. Thus the giving of the oracles of God, the giving of Palestine, and all other blessings properly belong only to the double circumcised Jew but which things are never promised to merely single circumcised Jews. The issue is what makes a “Jew” a true spiritual Jew in the sight of God. The answer is a true ethnic son of Abraham requires both outward and inward circumcision to make the claim to be a true “Jew.”

2. Galatians 6:16

*And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, **and** mercy, and upon the Israel of God.*

First, interpreters fail to understand that the churches in Galatia consisted of both Gentile and Jewish believers.

Second, they fail to see that both Gentile and Jewish believers are addressed in this same verse. The Gentile believers are addressed by the phrase “*on them*” whereas the Jewish believers among them are addressed as “*the Israel of God*” in contrast to lost Jews which Jesus calls “the synagogue of Satan.” The

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

conjunction “*and*” separates the two as well as the double repetition of the Greek preposition “epi” translated “*on*” and “*upon*.” There are the saved Gentiles “*them*” and the saved Jews “*the Israel of God*.” If the church is “*the Israel of God*” it would have read “peace be upon the Israel of God” rather than “*peace be on them, and mercy, AND upon the Israel of God*.”

3. Romans 9:6

*Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect.
For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel:*

He is simply saying that not all of ethnic Israel *after the flesh* is of the elect *spiritual ethnic* Israel. The true Israel of God is double circumcised or double born. Isaac and Jacob are immediately given as examples of the true ethnic spiritual Israel in contrast to Ishmael and Esau although all four were ethnic Israel according to the flesh. Again, the issue is between single versus double circumcised ethnic Jews or in this case single birth versus double birth ethnic Jews.

The preceding context in verses 1-5 has absolutely no reference to gentile believers at all, but with the promises of God to ethnic spiritual Israel or true sons of Abraham “after the Spirit” in addition to “after the flesh.”

He provides two distinguishing characteristics between ethnic Israel *after the flesh* and ethnic Israel *after the Spirit*. The true

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

ethnic Israel of promise are not only physically born, as was both Ishmael and Isaac, but supernaturally born by promise as was Isaac and Jacob. The true ethnic Israel of promise are not merely physically born, as were both Jacob and Esau, but are chosen by God before they are born and that choice has nothing to do with foreseen actions on their part whether good or bad, but strictly according to the eternal purpose of elective grace.

Within ethnic Israel is an ethnic spiritual Israel, which are double circumcised and double born, and it is this Israel that the promises are given and election to salvation is all about. The future salvation of the nation of Israel is based upon individual unconditional election to new birth as in the cases of Isaac and Jacob.

This truth repudiates the final interpretative error, which is, Romans 9 has nothing to do with individual election to salvation but merely to do with the election of ethnic Israel as a nation.

B. National rather than Individual Election

The second major misinterpretation of Romans 9 is that election in this context should be restricted to Israel as an ethnic nation over other nations. This interpretation denies that personal unconditional election to individual new birth is being defended by Paul in Romans 9.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

However, this interpretation denies the very point being set forth by Paul in Romans 9:1-13. Paul is arguing that God's promises are faithful to ethnic national Israel, but not to merely the natural circumcised or natural born nation of Israel. His promises to Israel are fulfilled only in an ethnic double circumcised or double born spiritual Israel consisting of unconditionally chosen supernaturally born individuals illustrated by the examples of Isaac and Jacob.

Moreover, the purpose of individual unconditional election to new birth is not restricted to merely ethnic spiritual Israel, but also includes individual elect Gentiles as well (Rom. 9:24).

*Even us, whom he hath called, **not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?** – Rom. 9:24*

These “gentiles” are not part of ethnic spiritual Israel, but they are part of God's unconditional election to new birth. The promise of God to Abraham is not only that He would father a nation out of his own loins, but he would be a father of “many nations” in addition to Israel.

The basis for the false interpretation that this is national rather than individual election to new birth is that Paul is quoting Romans 9:11 from Malachi 1:2-3 long after the death of the individuals. Hence, they argue that it must refer to their offspring as nations and not to the individuals per se.

However, this does not remove the difficulty they are trying to avoid, which is God hated Esau and loved Jacob in regard to

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

unconditional election to birthright. Nations consist of individuals, and therefore, instead of hating merely one individual (Esau), their interpretation has God hating a whole nation of individuals.

The truth is that the Edomites were an accursed people by God and were not merely typical of the non-elect, but there is no indication that any of the Edomites were ever saved. While on the other hand, not only is Israel typical of the elect, but the saving work of God prior to the coming of Christ was primarily restricted within the nation of Israel.

Therefore, the contextual point Paul is making with Jacob and Esau is the very same contextual point Paul is making with Isaac and Ishmael. Mere *physical* election as a nation does not mean individual personal salvation. Salvation is personal and individual by election to a supernatural birth, as illustrated by the individual cases of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau.

Finally, the gentile Pharaoh is also an illustration that individual personal election was not merely inclusive of Jewish individuals (Ishmael and Esau) but God's wider application of Election can be seen in the case of individual Gentiles. There were individual Gentiles who were not part of God's elect (Pharaoh and "vessels of wrath") just as there were individual Jews not part of God's elect (Ishmael and Esau).

Pharaoh is given as an example that encapsulates this idea of elect and non-elect out of every nation, as his example is

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

preceded by and followed by the principle that God can choose whom He wills:

For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.

– Rom. 9:15-16

THE EXAMPLE OF PHARAOH – Rom. 9:17

Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. – Rom. 9:18

As you can plainly see he does not apply Romans 9:1-14 to nations but to individuals “*on whom*” “*not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth.*” In addition Paul’s response to the objector of Romans 9:18 is the analogy of the Potter that deals with individuals or “vessels” rather than nations and especially those individuals called to salvation out of nations (Rom. 9:24).

Paul’s whole point is that mere national election in a physical sense (“after the flesh”) does not obtain salvation for any nation over another nation or for any individual within such a nation. Election to salvation is “after the spirit” and in regard to ethnic Israel it is only those individuals who are double circumcised/double born who the elect Israel are according to promise of salvation and blessing in Abraham.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

C. God has Not Fully Rejected the Nation of Israel

The third major interpretation error is that Paul is teaching that God has rejected Israel as a nation forever. This position argues that God may save individual Jews until the end of the age, but He has forever cast off Israel, as an ethnic nation, from elective salvation.

However, this is the very opposite of what Paul is arguing in Romans 9-11 (Rom. 11:1-4). Paul is arguing that God's election of national Israel to salvation is not to be interpreted by physical birth but by unconditional elective spiritual birth (Rom. 9), and not through obedience to the Law but through faith in the gospel (Rom. 10), and not now, as there is a temporary rejection of Israel now for the purpose to call out the gentile elect, but their unconditional election to salvation individually and finally collectively as an ethnic nation will be accomplished immediately after all the Gentile elect are saved (Rom. 11:25-28) at the second advent of Christ. In the mean time, between the time of Paul until the time that the Gentile elect are brought in, there is in every generation a Jewish ethnic "remnant" of Israelites that will be saved as proof that God has not utterly forsaken His promise to ethnic Israel as a nation.

1. All agree that what has been broken off in Romans 11 is the ethnic nation of Israel. However, it is THAT which has been "broken off" that is to be "grafted" back in "again" (Rom. 11:23). The "remnant" has never been broken off. In every generation

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

there is a “remnant” of Jews saved as evidence that God has not utterly forsaken Israel.

2. Israel has temporarily stumbled and has been temporarily rejected by God, but has not ultimately fallen from God’s elective purpose of salvation – Rom. 11:11

3. The Israel that has been rejected is the Israel that needs redemption under the new covenant – Rom. 11:25-28.

4. The Israel that is to be redeemed is **now** the enemy of the Gospel for the sake of gentile salvation (Rom. 11:28a). Hence, it cannot be synonymous with the gentiles being saved now. Furthermore, the Israel which is the enemy now of gentiles is the same Israel that is still the beloved of the Father according to the purpose of election to salvation – Rom. 11:28b. Therefore, it is the enemy of the gospel right now that will be “grafted back in again” in the future (Rom. 11:23).

5. Neither the church nor Gentiles are ever called “Jacob” in either the Old or New Testaments. “Jacob” is the name God calls unregenerate and rebellious ethnic Israel, but it is “Jacob” that God will save at the second coming of Christ – Rom. 11:26-27.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

II. The Anticipated Pauline Objector

There are two primary approaches to Romans 9. There is the Arminian approach which denies that unconditional election to new birth is being taught, but rather only unconditional national election to special privilege is being taught. The opposing approach is that the election of Israel as a nation is to salvation based upon unconditional election to new birth individually and ultimately “all Israel” as a future ethnic nation will be corporately saved.

What is interesting is that whichever view Paul is taking in Romans 9, he anticipates an objector to the view he is presenting. Significantly, the objections he anticipates are the exact objections that the Arminian gives to someone presenting the view of unconditional election to new birth. Moreover, the exact responses by Paul to these anticipated objections are exactly the responses of those who embrace unconditional election to new birth give to Arminians today.

For example, after giving Jacob and Esau as an example of unconditional election to redemption and reprobation in Romans 9:11-13, Paul presents the objector as claiming what Paul has taught makes God unfair, and unrighteous:

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid. – Romans 9:14

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

Now, is not this the classic response by all Arminians to unconditional election to new birth? However, is not Paul's response to this objection the classic response of those who defend unconditional election to new birth?

For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.

– Rom. 9:15-16

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.— Rom. 9:17

Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. – Rom. 9:18

Would any Arminian give such a response to answer such an objection as given in verse 14? No!

For example, after Paul says that God raised up Pharaoh for this very purpose to demonstrate that God can harden whom he will, and have mercy upon whom he will, Paul anticipates the objection that this would make the one being hardened without fault, as who can resist God's will, if it is God who hardeneth whom he wills? This objector is clearly saying that if this be the case then God is the author of sin:

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

*Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault?
For who hath resisted his will? – Rom. 9:18*

In other words, how can God blame Pharaoh if God raised up Pharaoh to accomplish His purpose by hardening him? In regard to God being the author of sin and a tyrant who does what He wills, Paul responds:

20 Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

21 Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?

22 What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,

24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

His response is very simple:

1. You have no right to tell God how he can use what He made and owns – v. 20.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

2. God can use the “same lump” of fallen depraved humanity to do what he pleases since justice does not require salvation of any of fallen humanity but only wrath. – v. 21
3. Is not God just in showing his wrath on what part of depraved fallen humanity he chooses, and who can demand mercy since justice only demands wrath. God can equally show mercy upon whom he chooses – v. 22
4. God’s mercy is based upon His eternal purpose in regard to some – v. 23
5. The effectual call is the mercy of God shown to both Jews and Gentiles – v. 24

Now, would any Arminian make this kind of response in verses 20-24 to the charge that God is unfair in choosing upon whom He will have mercy or whom he will harden in verses 15-18???? No! This (vv. 20-24) is the classic response of those who believe that God can do what he wills with fallen humanity as their Creator.

He is speaking about “fallen” humanity as the “same lump” of clay because “mercy” presupposes just punishment, as one does not have to have “mercy” upon sinless persons. God is just, as His holiness demands perfect justice. Therefore, he cannot be referring to unfallen man, but to the mass of fallen humanity.

Hardening of fallen humanity occurs simply by exposing them to light as they hate the light and love darkness more than light (Jn. 3:19-20). God sent Moses to reveal God’s commandment to him.

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

His fallen nature is at “enmity against God” and his fallen will is “not subject to the Law of God and neither indeed can be” due to his own fallen condition (Rom. 8:7). In contrast, God’s mercy is toward the very same fallen nature, but it is the effectual call (v. 24) or quickening power of God through the gospel (1 Thes. 1:4-5) that makes the difference in response by the elect from the non-elect. A person can know they are the elect of God by how the gospel comes to them and how they respond to it (1 Thes. 1:4-5).

III. The Two Olive Trees

Paul uses the analogy of two olive trees in Romans 11:16-24. There is a natural Olive tree that has the privilege of special cultivating blessings. There is a “wild” uncultivated olive tree. It is clear that the rejected nation of Israel was part of the cultivated olive tree and are the “branches” now broken off, which Paul says that God is able to “graft back in again” into that tree (Rom. 11:23). It is clear that the “wild” olive tree represents Gentiles, who have been grafted into the cultured olive tree but who may be broken off just as the Nation of Israel had been broken off from the cultured tree.

If either tree represents the individual saved or lost condition, then we have the doctrine of saved (branches of the olive tree), lost (branches broken off) and resaved (branches grafted back again) in regard to the nation of Israel, and in regard to these Gentiles we have the doctrine of lost (branches of wild), saved

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

(grafted into cultured) and lost (broken off as were the natural branches). This is why this analogy is used by all who oppose eternal security of true believers. However, this scenario of lost, saved, lost and resaved is declared impossible by the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 6:6).

However, if the natural olive tree represents the special cultured care of God or the POSITION of favored EXTERNAL privilege and blessings as the primary sphere of God's redemptive sphere of focus for calling out His elect, then the natural olive tree simply represents the ethnic area of redemptive activity and special manifest blessings by God.

Israel had been in the POSITION of EXTERNAL privilege due to the promise by God to Abraham (Rom. 9:4; Heb. 9:1-2). God had CULTURED this tree as a "husband" would care for a vineyard. Unlike a "wild" tree, this tree received special care of being water, pruned, and cultivated. This special cultured activity by God included the public house of worship, its public ministry, ordinances and mission (Heb. 9:1-2; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4) and manifest influence of the preaching of God's Word.

This external cultivating care was the consequence of the promise of God to Abraham concerning the fruit of his own loins. However, Abraham was also promised to be a father of many nations.

Therefore, any branches attached to that root are receivers of God's special cultivating blessings and the focus of his redemptive

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

activities. Hence, from Abraham to A.D. 70 Israel was the primary focus of God's blessings and sphere of calling out His elect. In A.D. 70 God turned from Israel and took away those special cultivating privileges and blessings (the public house of God, the public qualified ministry, the public qualified administration of ordinances, the public qualified mission; etc.) and turned from Israel as the primary ethnic sphere for his redemptive activity and turned to the Gentiles and is now calling out a people from among the gentiles. When the Gentiles, as a people despise the blessings of God upon them as a favored people, then God will turn from the Gentiles back to the nation of Israel as the focus of external cultivating blessings and redemptive activity.

Conclusion

The subject of Romans 9-11 is national Israel in God's eternal purpose not the church. God has not forgotten His promise to covenant promise to national Israel. Their rejection of Christ is temporary as God turns to accomplish his promise to Abraham to be a father of many nations – the gentiles.

His election of Israel is to national salvation but on an individual unconditional election to new birth (Rom. 9:6-24). It is unconditional election to salvation "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thes. 2:13) of the Gospel (Rom. 10). It is not now, but as soon as God calls His elect people out of the Gentiles (Rom. 11:25-28). Right now until that appointed time

Properly Interpreting Romans 9

of salvation God is saving the gentiles and causing Israel to be envious of God's blessings on the Gentiles.

Right now, Israel is the enemy of the gospel for the sake of salvation of the gentile elect, but is still beloved by the Father in regard to its ultimate election to salvation (Rom. 11:28).