All Israel Shall Be Saved: Understanding Paul’s Meaning in Romans 11:25–26

Introduction: A Puzzling Phrase in Paul’s Writings

Few passages in the New Testament have stirred as much discussion as Romans 11:25–26:

> *“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery … that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved.”*

For centuries, theologians have asked: *Who is Israel here?* Is Paul speaking of the ethnic descendants of Jacob, the church, or a future mass conversion of Jews—or something broader, the covenant people joined by faith?

Paul’s statement sits at the crossroads of theology, history, and language. It has often been misunderstood, especially when read through modern lenses such as **political Zionism** or **replacement theology.** Yet when examined carefully, Paul’s meaning becomes clear:

> *“All Israel” refers not to an ethnic or political nation but to the **total covenant family of God**, made up of all—Jew and Gentile—who believe in Christ.*

I. The Four Major Interpretations of "All Israel"

New Testament scholar **Mark Zoccali** surveyed the main schools of thought on Romans 11:26 in his 2008 article *"And So All Israel Will Be Saved: Competing Interpretations of Romans 11:26 in Pauline Scholarship"* (*Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30:1). He grouped the views into four categories:

1. **The Ecclesiastical Interpretation** – This view says *Israel = the Church.* Proponents argue that when Paul says "Israel," he means the community of believers, not ethnic Jews (cf. Romans 9:6). While this highlights the unity of God's people, many now regard it as too rigid—it can suggest that Jews as a people no longer matter to God, which Paul himself denies in Romans 11:1 ("Hath God cast away his people? God forbid").
2. **The Total National Elect View** – This position sees "all Israel" as the *complete number of elect Israelites* who, like Gentiles, will be saved through faith in Christ. It stresses that salvation comes by the same means—Christ—for all. The focus here is on **how** salvation occurs rather than **who** is Israel.
3. **The Two-Covenant View** – A minority opinion claiming Jews are automatically saved by belonging to the old covenant, even without Christ. This contradicts Paul's own testimony that he, though a Jew, needed Christ to be saved (Philippians 3:7–9; Romans 9:1–5).
4. **The Eschatological Miracle View** – Common in modern evangelicalism, this teaches that at Christ's return all Jews alive will experience a mass conversion, fulfilling "all Israel shall be saved." This idea fuels much end-times speculation about the modern state of Israel, yet

it conflicts with Paul's insistence that salvation is through faith now, not through a future national event.

Each of these interpretations captures a partial truth but fails to account for Paul's careful wording and Old Testament foundation. His meaning transcends them all. Through exegesis it becomes clear that Paul's "Israel" is neither replaced, purely national, nor awaiting a future ethnic revival. Rather, he speaks of a **theological and covenantal Israel**—the full family of God, Jew and Gentile alike, redeemed through faith in Christ, the promised Seed of Abraham. In that sense, Paul's understanding forms a *fifth and more complete view,* built not from speculation but from Scripture itself.

Additional links for Zoccali on this topic: Link HERE

II. Paul's Meaning in Context

Romans 9–11 form a single, continuous argument. Paul wrestles with Israel's unbelief and God's faithfulness to His promises. In Romans 9:6 he declares:

> *"They are not all Israel, which are of Israel."*

In that one line, Paul distinguishes between **physical descent** and **spiritual identity.** Not all who spring from Jacob truly belong to the covenant family; rather, those who share the **faith of Abraham** do.

He explains this fully in Galatians 3:7–9:

> *"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham … In thee shall all nations be blessed."*

So for Paul, *Israel* is not defined by bloodline but by **believing loyalty to Christ.** This means both Jews and Gentiles who trust in the Messiah are members of the same redeemed household—the true Israel of God (cf. Galatians 6:16).

Paul's concern, then, is not to exclude ethnic Jews but to include Gentile believers in the covenant blessings originally promised through Abraham. The "mystery" of Romans 11:25 is that God has opened His covenant to all nations.

III. Theological Implications: Israel as God's Covenant Family

Paul's phrase *"all Israel"* therefore expresses a **theological reality**, not an ethnic census. Through exegesis we see him redefine *"Israel"* around covenant faith rather than physical descent. It is a theological category because it arises from **God's revealed plan of redemption**, not from human ancestry.

If Paul had meant "all Jews," he would have used the Greek word *Ioudaioi* ("Judeans" or "Jews"). Instead he chose *Israel*—a term that in Scripture represents the **whole covenant family** of God: believing Judeans (Jews), the dispersed of Israel, and Gentiles who, by faith, have entered the same promise.

This understanding balances two errors that still divide the church today—**replacement theology**, which wrongly claims that God has rejected Israel, and **Zionist futurism**, which assumes the modern nation of Israel remains God's prophetic centerpiece.
Paul rejects both extremes. He affirms God's mercy toward Israel (Romans 11:28–29) yet insists that salvation comes only through faith in Christ—for Jew and Gentile alike.
Thus *"all Israel"* means **all who belong to God's covenant family through Christ**, the reconstituted people of faith under

the new covenant.

IV. Continuity with the Old Testament

Paul's theology is deeply rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. When he says *"all Israel,"* he echoes a phrase found 153 times in the Old Testament—where it consistently refers to the **collective twelve tribes** of God's people.

Jeremiah 30:3 foretells the restoration of *"Israel and Judah"*—both northern and southern tribes—showing that God's covenant plan always encompassed the whole family, not one tribe alone.

Likewise, Hosea 1:9–10 records God's declaration that the rebellious house of Israel—once called *"not My people"*—would again be called *"My people."* Paul quotes this prophecy in Romans 9:25–26 and extends its principle to the Gentiles, showing that the same mercy which restores Israel also reaches the nations. Through faith in Christ, Gentiles who were never God's people are now included in the redeemed family, alongside the restored remnant of Israel.

Gentile believers, then, are not outsiders but participants in the fulfillment of God's covenant promise. As Paul writes in Ephesians 2:14–16, Christ has "broken down the middle wall of partition" to make *"one new man"* from both Jew and Gentile.

From Genesis to Revelation, the pattern is the same: God's true people are those who place their faith in Him. In the Old Testament, that meant allegiance to Yahweh. In the New Testament, it means faith in Yahweh incarnate—Jesus Christ.

V. Jesus the Israelite: Correcting a Misleading Label

Modern Christians often repeat that *"Jesus was a Jew,"* yet this reflects a **later linguistic shift.** In the New Testament era, *Jew* (Greek *Ioudaios*) meant *"Judean,"* referring to those connected to the southern region and its temple—not to all Israelites or to the later religion of Judaism.

As scholar **John H. Elliott** explains in *"Jesus the Israelite Was Neither 'Jew' nor 'Christian' "* (2007), *Ioudaios* was "outsider coinage best rendered 'Judean.'" Jesus and His followers were known as Israelites, Galileans, or Nazarenes. Born in Bethlehem of Judea but raised in Galilee, Jesus was a **Galilean Israelite**, not a temple-aligned Judean. His disciples were Galileans (Acts 1:11); those who opposed Him—the Pharisees and Sadducees—were *Ioudaioi*, the Judean authorities.

Recognizing this distinction has profound implications. To call Jesus a "Jew" projects onto Him a **post-biblical religious identity** that did not exist in His lifetime—rabbinic Judaism, which developed after A.D. 70. Jesus upheld the Law of Moses but condemned the traditions of men (Mark 7:6–9; Matthew 15:3).

Jesus was therefore not a "Jew" in the modern sense but the **true Israelite of the covenant**, the promised Son of David and embodiment of faithful Israel. Recognizing Him as such restores His rightful place in redemptive history—the **true Israelite through whom all nations are blessed** (Genesis 22:18; Galatians 3:16).

To grasp Paul's meaning more fully, Section VI next, will help to step back into the first-century world and view his words as his original audience would have understood them. Additionally, to understand this more clearly, it is important to distinguish how the words *"Jew," "Judean," and "Israelite"* were used in the first century—a difference often lost in

translation (see Appendix B).

VI. Interpreting Romans 11 in Historical Perspective

When reading Romans 11:25–26, it is vital to remember that Paul was writing to first-century believers in Rome—both Judeans and Gentiles—who were wrestling with the unfolding mystery of God's plan. The letter addressed their present situation, not a distant, futuristic prophecy. Paul was explaining how God's covenant faithfulness was being fulfilled then, as the Gentiles were being grafted into Israel's olive tree (Romans 11:17–24).

Modern readers often project the text forward, influenced by dispensationalist futurism popularized through the Scofield Reference Bible, which treats "all Israel shall be saved" as a prediction of a mass national conversion of Jews at the end of history. But Paul's grammar and context indicate otherwise. The Greek phrase *houtōs pas Israēl sōthēsetai* means "in this manner," not "and then." Paul is describing **how** salvation occurs—by faith in Christ—not predicting **when** it will happen.

In Paul's day, the term *Ioudaios* referred to Judeans, the southern remnant of Israel centered around Jerusalem and the temple. These represented only part of Israel, not the full twelve tribes. The ten northern tribes had long been scattered among the nations. Therefore, when Paul speaks of "Israel," he is referring not to a modern ethnic group called "the Jews," but to the **whole covenant family**—believing Judeans and Gentiles together being restored through the gospel.

Today, there are no "pure-blooded" ethnic Israelites in the genealogical sense; centuries of dispersion, intermarriage, and conversion have made that impossible. But God's covenant

promises were never grounded in DNA—they were always rooted in faith. Paul affirms this: “For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6). True Israel has always been the community of faith, and in Christ, that community now includes people of every nation who believe in Him.

Thus, the modern use of the word “Jew” cannot retroactively define Paul’s meaning. It is a later linguistic development, disconnected from the first-century context. As John H. Elliott observes, “Jew” was not a self-designation used by Jesus or His disciples. Therefore, when Paul declares that “all Israel shall be saved,” he is not referring to twentieth- or twenty-first-century national Israel, but to the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan already unfolding in his own time—the salvation of the covenant people through faith in the Messiah.

This interpretation restores Paul’s intent as both pastoral and theological: to assure believers that God’s promises to Israel have not failed, because those promises are being fulfilled in Christ. “All Israel” means all who belong to Him—the redeemed family of faith, Jew and Gentile alike, united under the new covenant.

Conclusion: The Unity of God’s People in Christ

When Paul says *“and so all Israel shall be saved”* (Romans 11:26), he is not predicting a national revival of ethnic Jews nor teaching that God has abandoned them. He is declaring that **God’s saving plan unites Jew and Gentile into one covenant community,** the true Israel of God.

This reading preserves the balance of Scripture:

- It **honors** God’s continuing mercy toward Israel (Romans 11:1).
- It **affirms** that salvation comes only through Christ (Romans 10:12–13).
- And it **extends** the promises of Abraham to all who believe (Galatians 3:29).

“All Israel” is thus not a prophecy of geography or ethnicity—it is a portrait of redemption. It describes the total number of the faithful, drawn from every tribe and nation, who through Christ have become the heirs of God’s promises.

> *“There is neither Jew nor Greek … for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).*

Appendix A — Historical Notes & Source Evidence

1. **Mark Zoccali (2008)** — *“And So All Israel Will Be Saved: Competing Interpretations of Romans 11:26 in Pauline Scholarship,” JSNT 30(1):69–85.*
   Zoccali outlines four primary approaches to Romans 11:26 and notes the tension between ethnic and ecclesial readings (pp. 70–74). His survey shows the limits of each approach and the need for a covenantal synthesis.
2. **Jason A. Staples (2011)** — *“What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25–27,” JBL 130(2):371–390.*
   Staples argues that “all Israel” echoes Old Testament usage for the twelve tribes as a whole (p. 381). Supports the essay’s claim that Paul’s “Israel” is covenantal and theological, including Gentiles with

believing Jews.

3. **Flavius Josephus (first century AD)** — *Antiquities of the Jews 11:5 (§173).*
   "From the day they went up from Babylon, they were called by that name in Greek, hoi Ioudaioi … after the tribe of Judah."
   Shows that *Ioudaios* ("Jew"/"Judean") originated in the exilic period and denoted a subset of Israel, not the whole nation.
4. **John H. Elliott (2007)** — *"Jesus the Israelite Was Neither 'Jew' nor 'Christian': On Correcting Misleading Labels,"* JS Hist Jesus 5(2):119–154.
   Elliott observes: "Jesus and his earliest followers were called Israelites, Galileans, or Nazarenes … 'Ioudaios' was outsider coinage best rendered 'Judean.'" (pp. 124–127). Confirms that "Jew" was primarily a geographic label; "Israel" retained its spiritual and covenantal sense.
5. **BDAG Lexicon (F. W. Danker, ed., 2000)** — *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 3rd ed., s.v. "Ioudaios."*
   Warns that careless translation of "Ioudaios" as "Jew" without context has caused "incalculable harm," since modern readers import post-biblical meanings. Demonstrates Paul's intentional word choice in using "Israel," not *Ioudaios.*
6. **Old Testament Usage of "All Israel"** — *Deuteronomy 29:2; Joshua 8:33; 1 Samuel 7:5; 1 Kings 8:65–66; 2 Chronicles 12:1.*
   The phrase regularly denotes the entire twelve-tribe assembly. Confirms that Paul's wording mirrors the Hebrew Bible's picture of the full covenant community.
7. **Hosea and Paul's Quotation (Romans 9:25–26 / Hosea 1:9–10)** —
   Hosea prophesied that the ten-tribe kingdom, once disowned as *Lo-Ammi* ("not My people"), would again be called *"My people."* Paul cites this passage in Romans

9:25–26 to illustrate God's mercy reaching beyond ethnic Israel. Shows Paul's typological reasoning: the restoration of Israel's covenant status through Christ opens the same mercy to Gentiles, uniting both in one redeemed household.

8. **E. P. Sanders (1977)** — *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press), pp. 252–255.
   Sanders notes that the Qumran community referred to itself as "the remnant of Israel," "the captives of Israel," and "the repentant of Israel," not "the Jews." Even within Second-Temple Judaism, "Israel" carried theological meaning independent of ethnicity.
9. **Paul's Own Writings as Self-Commentary** — *Romans 9:6–8; Galatians 3:7–29; Ephesians 2:11–22.*
   In each text, Paul defines Abraham's heirs as those of faith. Confirms internally that Paul's concept of "Israel" is faith-based and covenantal, not ethnic.
10. **Consensus of Recent Pauline Studies** — Scholars such as Staples, Zoccali, Wright, and Gorman favor a participation-in-Christ model for Israel's identity. Corroborates the essay's conclusion that "all Israel" denotes the one covenant community—Jews and Gentiles—united in Christ.

For clarification of the key terms "Jew," "Judean," and "Israelite," see Appendix B.

Appendix B — Terminology: "Jew," "Judean," and "Israelite"

Modern readers often assume that *Jew* in Scripture equals the modern religious or ethnic term, but in the first century the Greek **Ἰουδαῖος (*Ioudaios*)** meant **"Judean."** It described those from the southern territory of Judea or aligned with its

temple system—not every descendant of Jacob and not the later faith of rabbinic Judaism.

As **John H. Elliott** (University of San Francisco) explains, *Ioudaios* was "outsider coinage best rendered 'Judean.'" Jesus and His followers were called Israelites, Galileans, or Nazarenes. Thus, the statement *"Jesus was a Jew"* is historically misleading—He was a **Galilean Israelite**, not a Jew in the post-exilic or rabbinic sense.

Meanwhile, scholars such as **Jason A. Staples** use *Jew* conventionally in English for clarity, meaning simply "descendants of Judah" or "the southern remnant of Israel." Staples' concern is theological: in Romans 11:26, "all Israel" designates the **restored covenant family of God**—believing Judeans (Jews), dispersed Israelites, and Gentiles joined together through Christ.

When read together, Elliott and Staples complement each other:

- **Elliott** provides linguistic accuracy—Jesus was a **Judean by birth, an Israelite by covenant**, not a "Jew" as modernly understood.
- **Staples** provides theological continuity—God's people are defined by faith in Christ, not ethnicity.

This careful distinction preserves both historical truth and covenantal theology, keeping Paul's phrase *"all Israel shall be saved"* grounded in its proper linguistic and redemptive context.
