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Albuquerque, NM

August 17, 2008
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A GREAT MYSTERY
Romans 11:1-2a; 25-36

One of the most pressing questions for the apostle Paul was this: has God rejected the people of Israel? This was not a theoretical question for him. It was both deeply personal and deeply theological. It was deeply personal in that Paul himself was Jewish to the core. He describes himself as “an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.” Even though Paul had first rejected Jesus as the Messiah, God stopped Paul in his tracks on the road to Damascus. As a persecutor of the church, God could have simply rejected Paul. But Paul himself received God’s mercy and grace and came to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Clearly Paul was not rejected, this Hebrew of the Hebrews.

So has God rejected Israel? This question was also deeply theological for Paul. Jesus “came to his own and his own received him not”. Nevertheless, Paul claims that God remains faithful to all the promises to Abraham. And thus God has not rejected the people of Israel. In fact, Paul makes an astonishing assertion in Romans 11. He claims that God revealed to him a “mystery” about Israel’s fate. And here is the mystery in a nutshell. After the “full number of the Gentiles come in” as believers in Jesus, then “all Israel will be saved.” Now this really is a stunning claim.

And here is how Paul explains this mystery. Earlier in Romans 11 he depicts the nation of Israel as an olive tree which God planted. But some of her branches were pruned because of Israel’s hardness of heart. Think of 586 BC when Jerusalem was destroyed and sent into Babylonian exile. As was the case then, Paul says that in his time “a hardening has come upon part of Israel.” Those who hardened their hearts were like branches pruned from the tree. As a result the Gentiles were grafted onto the olive tree. Gentile believers are like wild olive branches grafted onto the original tree. The disobedience of Israel led to the Gentiles joining the family of faith.

But Paul is convinced that the “gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” That is to say, the people of Israel will always be part of God’s grace and mercy. Think of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Though he angrily rejects his father’s kindness toward his younger brother, the father still invites his disaffected older son to join the party. The parable ends with this unanswered question: Will the older brother ever join

in the feast of celebration? Here in Romans 11 Paul seems to answer that question with an emphatic Yes!

The older brother, the olive tree, the people of Israel will yet be saved. Paul quotes from the prophet Isaiah who yearned for a time when the Deliverer will “banish ungodliness from Jacob.” Paul envisions a day when God “will be merciful to all”, even those who first rejected Jesus as the Christ.

So Israel’s hardness of heart is only partial and only temporary. Earlier in chapter 11 Paul claims that the Gentiles coming to faith will “make Israel jealous” (11:11). That jealousy will, according to Paul, move Israel to finally accept Jesus as the Messiah. Think of the older brother out in the fields envious of the party thrown for his younger brother. His jealousy moves him ultimately to join the celebration. At least, that was Paul’s fondest wish and hope.

Paul is so taken by this envisioned scenario, this mystery revealed, that he breaks out into praise of God: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways!” God will move in mercy toward all of Israel just as God moved in mercy toward Paul himself. And then “all Israel will be saved” as Paul himself had been saved. That for Paul is the great mystery.

Now there are a number of ways for us to respond to Paul’s notion of Israel’s mysterious future salvation. Some critics complain that Paul seems to pull this mysterious notion out of thin air. When there are no ready explanations for something, too often people fall back on smoke and mirrors, obfuscation if you will. And so Paul seems to reach into his bag of tricks just when he can not explain the obvious.

And the obvious is that most of Paul’s fellow Israelites said no to Jesus. Paul is one of the few who did indeed receive Jesus as the Messiah. But only after he was stopped in his tracks on his way to persecuting the church. So one way to respond to Paul’s claim is to say, “Paul, this is a cop out. You really can’t explain Israel’s present rejection of Jesus so you claim some future cleansing and redemption for your people.”

Others have simply pointed out that nowhere else in Paul’s letters does he make this claim. Did Paul just go off on a tangent here in the Roman epistle? And furthermore, some point out that Paul’s scenario simply has not happened. In two thousand years of church history, there have been no mass conversions of the Jewish people. Even when an aggressive church tried forcible conversions of the Jews, it produced little acceptance of the Christian faith in Israel. So in their view, Paul has been proven wrong.

Others have tried to suggest that the founding of the contemporary state of Israel on May 14, 1948, is the fulfillment of prophecy. For these folks, the mystery was solved when Israel became a state out of the ashes of the Holocaust. And this startling event will lead finally to a time when “all Israel will be saved.”

This view is called Christian Zionism. I have included a brief description of the core beliefs of Christian Zionism in your order of worship. The heart of this viewpoint is that all the Biblical prophecies of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament point to the re-establishment of the state of Israel. At that point the clock begins ticking down to the End of Time and the return of Jesus. And the conversion of Israel to Christian faith is often part of the scenario Christian Zionism paints of the future.

So this viewpoint sees Paul’s mystery in Romans 11 playing itself out in the very near future. Christian Zionism has been promoted by John Nelson Darby, Cyrus Scofield and his Scofield Reference Bible, Hal Lindsey, the Left Behind novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, as well as prominent televangelists like Pat Robertson and John Hagee. All these people truly believe that the state of Israel is the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy.

This has led to an ardent political support for the state of Israel. Most Christian Zionists believe that it is a Christian duty to support Israel. John Hagee helped establish the International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem and Christians United for Israel. Hagee’s ministry has raised millions of dollars to support Israel. The Israeli government welcomes his financial contributions and more importantly his political support for the state of Israel. And Hagee does all this because he believes that the state of Israel is a fulfillment of Biblical prophecy. This is true of virtually everyone who espouses Christian Zionism.

So the issues before us are both theological and political. Christian Zionists claim to have unlocked the riddle of the future. They claim to have penetrated the mystery of which Paul wrote in Romans. They see in the establishment of the state of Israel the fulfillment of biblical prophecies.

Now you need to know that the Presbyterian Church has long been opposed to this particular way of interpreting the Scriptures. As long ago as 1944 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church challenged this understanding of Scripture. Even before the state of Israel was formed in 1948 the GA was warning against Dispensationalism and Christian Zionism.

Let me speak plainly here. The General Assembly has urged Presbyterians to “speak out against the corrosive spiritual and political aspects of Christian Zionism”. I heartily endorse Presbyterian opposition to

this viewpoint, which I think is a terrible abuse of Scripture. I remember first encountering this issue back in the 1980's when Hal Lindsey's book **The Late Great Planet Earth** was published. Lindsey had all the maps and charts worked out as to how the Soviet Union would invade Israel and the battle of Armageddon would ensure. There was even a movie made from the book. Lindsey's book is sheer pulp fiction, theological nonsense. What is sad is that even after the Soviet Union fell and all the maps had to be redrawn, people still take Hal Lindsey seriously. And then of course the Left Behind series propagated the same pulp fiction. And now John Hagee.

A lot of Presbyterians-me included-just do not buy all this. The interpretation of Scripture Christian Zionism uses is in my opinion just dead wrong. I do not believe the Scriptures point to the re-establishment of the state of Israel. This is a secular state with little or no connection to the Bible of the kingdom of David. One cannot so easily jump from the Bible to 1948. Truly bad theology is involved here.

And the political implications of this theology are simply horrendous. A theologically charged support of Israel overlooks the immensely complex issues facing that region. The religious conflicts between Jews and Muslims, the political conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, and the on going regional conflicts are all complex enough without placing over the state of Israel a religious halo. There are injustices on both sides and huge problems that must be solved. To somehow call the state of Israel a fulfillment of prophecy simply aggravates an already tense situation.

The Presbyterian General Assembly has repeatedly called upon Israelis and Palestinians to negotiate in good faith to solve their tremendous problems. Christian Zionists simply make these problems worse. Their theology and their politics are a detriment to peace and justice in the Middle East. I believe we should without equivocation repudiate Christian Zionism.

And I think we should acknowledge that the mystery of Romans 11 is still a mystery. We do not claim to know exactly how the future will unfold. But to take Paul's mystery and turn it into a theological and political agenda that supports the state of Israel is a travesty. I really mean that. For the sake of responsible theology, this issue requires that we call a spade a spade.

So I pray that you will study this issue. Consider Paul's vision of a future that includes the people of Israel in God's grace. What is at stake here is the faithfulness of God. It is a mystery how all this will play out. I suppose it leaves us hopeful, awaiting the next stage of God's adventure of grace. There are many mysteries yet to be revealed. Amen.