

# THE CONCEPT OF THE REMNANT AS A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING GOD’S MESSAGE OF REDEMPTION

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Arriving at a consensus regarding the meaning inherent in the biblical terms “Jews” and “Israel” has proven to be an elusive objective. Do they refer to ethnic/national Israel exclusively? Or do they find their meaning allegorically in a reference to the redeemed people of the church? This paper seeks to contribute to that discussion by casting light on the biblical concept of the remnant. While it tends to be relegated to a minor role in many theological constructs,<sup>1</sup> when the remnant is considered closely, it emerges as a recurring element throughout God’s redemptive plan, and thus holds a key to understanding the major biblical themes of election, covenants and salvation. Having this understanding is important not just for the purpose of theological discourse, but because of its impact on Christian witness to Jewish people.

## THE REMNANT IN THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT

In the Old Testament, the remnant concept is conveyed primarily through the noun שְׂאֵר (*she’ar*), along with its variant שְׂאֵרִית (*she’erit*).<sup>2</sup> When used in a concrete manner, both terms tend to be translated as “remainder, rest or residue.” In more conceptual passages, especially those related to surviving or returning people, the word “remnant” is preferred. The verbal form, שָׂאֵר (“remain”), is derived from a root meaning “to swell up.”<sup>3</sup> This same root also forms the basis for שָׂאֵר, typically translated as “leaven.”<sup>4</sup> This commonality is reflected in the word picture associated with the use of leavening:

In the Ancient Near East, when making bread, a lump of fermented dough from a previous mixing was added to new flour and water, which then multiplied throughout the batch and caused it to rise and swell up.<sup>5</sup> In this manner, a small portion—a remnant—of the original dough endured and recreated a new batch with the same characteristics of the original batch. Thus the underlying meaning of the remnant can be expressed as a remainder with the imprint of the original. In keeping with that foundation, when applied biblically to the Jewish people, a small portion of the faithful men and women of one generation endured and was manifested in a new generation with the same faithful characteristics of the original one.

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. James W. Watts, “The Remnant Theme: A Survey of New Testament Research, 1921-1987,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 15 (1988), 124. Watts only acknowledges a historical role for the remnant, not an eschatological one.

<sup>2</sup> Four additional Hebrew terms express similar meaning—יָתֵר, פֶּלֶט, שָׂרִיר, and אֶתֶר.

<sup>3</sup> Julius Fuerst, *A Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon to the Old Testament* Fifth Edition, trans. Samuel Davidson (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1885), 1329.

<sup>4</sup> e.g. Ex 12:15; cf. 1 Cor 5:7.

<sup>5</sup> That is the process behind Paul’s words in Gal 5:9, and it is similar to the way that sourdough bread is made today. For a discussion on the biblical bread-making process, see George B. Eager, “Leaven,” in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 3, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), p. 1862.

In the New Testament, the concept of the remnant is expressed in the terms *λεῖμμα* (*leimma*) and *ὑπόλειμμα* (*hupoleimma*).<sup>6</sup> Both forms convey the sense of “what is left over.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, the LXX generally translates *רְשָׁיִם* and *תְּרֵינִי* as *λεῖμμα*.<sup>8</sup> Thus there is a general accord in meaning between the terms used in both testaments.

The remnant concept is invariably linked to the judgment of God in some manner. Thus the remnant is used to describe what remains of a community after going through a catastrophe brought on by divine judgment. This duality is evident throughout Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

In the flood story, the continuity of all humanity in the midst of divine judgment was preserved through the remnant of a single family (Gen 9:19).

God’s destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah was contingent on whether a remnant of ten righteous men could be found in the city (Gen 18:32). When that proved not to be a reality, the destruction took place and the remnant was reduced to Lot and his family.<sup>10</sup> But in the course of the negotiations between God and Abraham, God demonstrated His willingness to preserve the whole city because of the representative righteousness of only a remnant.

Joseph rose to a position of eminence in Egypt so that the clan of Jacob could be preserved in a time of great famine, saying, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance” (Gen 45:7).

Joshua and Caleb were the only two adult males among the Israelites who left Egypt and were allowed to enter the promised land of Canaan because of their faith, while the rest of the people showed a lack of trust in God (Num 14:1-38). Like the underlying meaning of the remnant, those two men were joined by a new generation that shared their characteristics of trust (Deut 1:35-39; Josh 1:16).

Elijah was the lone remaining prophet of YHWH (1 Ki 18:22), hence a remnant of the prophets. A similar ratio existed among the general population of the northern kingdom of Israel, with only 7,000 people in the entire nation who did not become worshipers of Baal (1 Ki 19:18).<sup>11</sup> While judgment did fall upon the nation, it was not a complete annihilation for apostasy and God notably cited the presence of the remnant for that act of grace.

In the days leading up to the northern kingdom of Israel being taken captive by Assyria, the prophet Amos declared that a small portion of the people called the “remnant of Joseph” would remain in the land, and their calling was to continue living righteously (Amos 5:3-15).<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the southern kingdom of Judah being taken captive to Babylon, Isaiah foretold the existence of the remnant as an indicator of God’s mercy in the midst of judgment: “Unless the LORD of hosts had left us a few survivors (*שְׂרִיר*), we would be like Sodom, we would be like Gomorrah (Isa 1:9). The Sodom and Gomorrah motif is used numerous places in Scripture as a metaphor for divine judgment (Deut 29:23; 32:32; Isa 3:9; Jer 23:14; 50:40; Am 4:11; Mat 11:24;

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<sup>6</sup> Some mss. have *κατάλειμμα* (*kataleimma*), a word with the identical meaning.

<sup>7</sup> See Gottlob Schrenk, “Leimma” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 194.

<sup>8</sup> Amos 5:15 is an exception, where the LXX reads *περιλοιπους*, without significantly altering the meaning.

<sup>9</sup> This is also true in extrabiblical writings, including parts of the Apocrypha (2 Esdras 6:25; 12:34; 13:48-49), Pseudepigrapha (1 Enoch 83:7-9; 84:5-6), and Qumran texts (CDa 2:5-7, 11-13; 4Q174 2:2).

<sup>10</sup> Werner Müller calls this act, “the sifting of the righteous from the wicked” in *Die Vorstellung vom Rest im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 44.

<sup>11</sup> About one century earlier, 630,000 fighting men were counted in the north (1 Chr 21:5). Thus it is estimated that the total population of the kingdom of Israel at the time of Elijah was over three million people.

<sup>12</sup> See Gerhard Hasel, *The Remnant* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1972), 206.

2 Pet 2:6; Jude 1:7).<sup>13</sup> But only in Isaiah 1:9 and Paul’s quotation of this verse in Romans 9:29 do we find any mention of people being spared judgment, and in both cases it is the remnant of righteous Jews. In other words, in light of the sinfulness of the nation, they should have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah, but God preserved a remnant and the nation was still alive.

Later Isaiah compared Israel to a cluster of grapes (65:8). Some grapes in a cluster may be spoiled and others may not yet be ripened, but others are sweet and will produce wine. So just as the owner of a vineyard would not discard a partially flawed cluster of grapes because it can still be productive, God promised not to discard Israel because of the faithfulness of a believing remnant.

Isaiah also foretold the character of the people who would later return to their ancestral land. He uses the phrase שְׂאֵר יַעֲקֹב—“remnant of Jacob”(10:21) and describes them as “relying on the LORD” (v. 20) and “overflowing with righteousness” (v. 22). This shows the restored existence of the physical nation as being based on the faithfulness of the returning remnant.

The prophet Zephaniah uses the term “remnant” in the context of a final restoration of national Israel and judgment of the people of the earth (1:2-3). They are described as “a humble and lowly people, and they will take refuge in the name of the LORD” (3:12-13). Taken together, it foretells a day of spiritual redemption in the context of national restoration.<sup>14</sup>

Paul does not employ the term remnant in Romans 9 until verse 27, but the concept is conveyed in his argument earlier in the chapter. In verses 6-8 he employs a measure of Hebraic poetry using parallelism that is both synonymous and synthetic in nature.

- Synonymous: “they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants.”
- Synthetic: “That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.”<sup>15</sup>

Some commentators interpret these verses as Paul saying words to the effect, “there is another Israel—“spiritual” Israel.”<sup>16</sup> But such a term is not to be found in Scripture and it originated with Justin Martyr in the Second Century in his attempt to repudiate any allowance for the Jewish people in the continuance of God’s redemptive economy.<sup>17</sup> This view considerably neglects the context of Romans 9 in which Paul repeatedly writes about the relationship between God and the ethnic Jewish people. Thus when read in context and the literary genre of this passage, we find Paul communicating the idea that true Israel is not some form of replacement entity, but a subgroup within the physical nation. He reinforces this point regarding the remnant

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<sup>13</sup> For an assessment of figurative use of Sodom and Gomorrah, see J.A. Loader, *A Tale of Two Cities: Sodom and Gomorrah in the Old Testament, Early Jewish and Early Christian Traditions* (Kampen, Netherlands: J.H. Hok, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> See King 414-27; and Michael Ufok Udoekpo, *Re-Thinking the Day of YHWH and Restoration of Fortunes in the Prophet Zephaniah* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010), 165-176.

<sup>15</sup> Synthetic parallelism advances a particular thought grammatically. It is reflected in the identical structure of verses 6b and 8.

<sup>16</sup> e.g. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 336; C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Fontana Press, 1959), 155; George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974, 379, 584; Erich Dinkler, “The Historical and the Eschatological Israel in Romans Chapters 9-11,” in *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr., 1956), pp. 109-127. Dinkler goes so far as to say (p. 114) that, “Ethnic Israel has nothing to do with spiritual Israel.”

<sup>17</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 16. His accusation was later repeated by Origen in *Contra Celsum* 2:8, and Martin Luther in *On the Jews and Their Lies* (LW 47:138), all of whom lived in eras when it seemed impossible for Israel to become a nation again.

by stating that among the Jewish people there are Jews “outward in the flesh” and inward “of the heart, by the Spirit” (Rom 2:28-29), and the “children of the promise” are physical descendants of Isaac alone (9:7).

In Romans 11:5 Paul correlates the presence of the remnant with divine election by grace (ἐχλογὴν χάριτος). By quoting from Deuteronomy 20:4 and Psalm 69:22-23 in the following verses, he shows that this election was maintained throughout the history of national Israel, in spite of a preponderance of unbelief among the people. And he connects this unbroken line of the remnant from Elijah’s day (v. 4) to “this present time” (v. 5), which was written a considerable number of years after the cross and Pentecost, thus excluding from Paul’s perspective any change in status for the concept of the remnant because of those monumental events.

Paul uses two metaphors in Romans 11:16 in order to reinforce his argument regarding the remnant representing national Israel. The first—“if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also” is an allusion to the commandment in the Law regarding the offering of a firstfruit cake consecrating the entire harvest (Num 15:18-21).<sup>18</sup> It also ties to the underlying meaning of the primary Hebrew term for the remnant, רֵשֵׁת. For as in the case of leavening spreading throughout a cake causing it to recreate a prior cake, the remnant recreates the prior nation.

The second metaphor—“if the root be holy, the branches are too” shares the same sense of the part representing the whole. The identity of the root is the subject of much debate,<sup>19</sup> but ultimately it does not detract from Paul’s primary thrust of illustrating how the remnant part of Israel represents the whole of ethnic Israel in terms of their spiritual fulfillment (v. 12), God’s continued acceptance (v. 15), and the retention of His covenant promises (vv. 25-27).

This overview of the biblical text demonstrates that the remnant refers to spiritually faithful people with a physically Jewish heritage, interconnected over time, and they serve as representatives of the entire nation regarding God’s covenant and redemptive intentions, often in the midst of divine judgment.

## THE ROLE OF THE REMNANT IN ELECTION

Election is largely viewed through different lenses by Christianity and Judaism. Whereas the Christian doctrine tends to focus on election that is limited and exclusive, one of the “pillars” of belief in Judaism is the inclusive national election of Israel. This position spans from second temple times through the talmudic era, and continues within modern Judaism.<sup>20</sup> It is a belief that assures not just the privilege of being “a holy people” on earth (Deut 7:6), but it is the basis for securing a favorable outcome in eternity. As the *Mishnah* records: “All Israel has a portion in the

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<sup>18</sup> Related to the concept of the part representing the whole is the promise given in 1 Cor 15:20-23 that the resurrection of Christ secures the resurrection of the redeemed.

<sup>19</sup> The interpretation of the root being the remnant is held by Dodd, 188-189; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale, 1963), 217; C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 200. The position where the patriarchs are the subject is held by John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1998), 332; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MA: Eerdmans, 1965), 85; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 700. A third view, in which the root is said to refer to Christ, was held by a number of church Fathers, including Origen (*In ep. Ad Romanos* 8:11); Gregory of Nissa (*Contra Eunomium* 3:2.54); as well as Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1957), 285; and N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible* 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 684.

<sup>20</sup> An example of the perceived assurance of election for all Jews in the rabbinic writings is expressed in the *Sifre* to Numbers 5:3. In recent times, Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), xvii-xviii, who is considered to be the father of modern rabbinic theology, articulated the same position.

world to come.”<sup>21</sup> Mark Elliott concurs:

Israel is the people of God, different from all peoples, and as such the focus of God’s redemptive work; the individual Israelite is secure in the knowledge that redemption is assured for the individual member of the nation.<sup>22</sup>

The sufficiency of physical birth as the means of securing citizenship in the kingdom of God, both in an earthly and an eternal sense, is also reflected in the perplexity of Nicodemus in response to Jesus’ declaration that he had to be “born again” in order to “see the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:3). In more recent times, Orthodox theologian, Michael Wyschogrod, rejected “universal election of faith” and accepted only “the national election of the seed of Abraham” because they seem to him as being mutually exclusive.<sup>23</sup> He employed the metaphor of family regarding God’s covenant relationship with the Jewish people, saying: “There is no way to God except through the Jewish people. . . To enter the [Abrahamic] covenant one must become part of this particular people or family.”<sup>24</sup> In a similar fashion, Conservative theologian David Novak states: “The covenant has two entrances, birth and conversion, but no exit.”<sup>25</sup>

But this understanding was not universally held in biblical times. A number of Jewish groups before and after the writing of the New Testament, most notably the Qumran community, believed in special election only for the righteous remnant of Israel.<sup>26</sup> Their perspective corresponds more closely to the emphasis in Christianity on God’s election unto salvation of individuals, not merely according to national origin. But those groups did not jettison God’s election of national Israel altogether. They retained a belief in the continuity of God’s promises to Israel as being accomplished through the remnant of the people.

Most Christian commentators tend to focus on the supranational nature of election. But in so doing, the temptation is to deny the validity of a distinct national election for Israel. John Piper expresses that view in response to Paul’s writings in Romans 9. He writes: “The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the view that Paul’s concern is for the eternal destinies of those *within* the nation Israel who are saved and who are accursed.”<sup>27</sup> But he sees it only as an individual matter, not on a national level, saying: “its real meaning is to be seen not in the election of an empirical people as a whole, but in the election of individuals.”<sup>28</sup> This view, however, removes a key hermeneutical instrument from the interpretive process by ignoring the manner in which the remnant represents the nation. In that regard, Douglas Moo observes: “This combination of a special election of individuals within, and alongside, a larger corporate election of Israel does better justice to the exegetical data than the view that Paul knows only a corporate election.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Sanhedrin 11:1*.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Adam Elliott, *The Survivors of Israel: A Reconsideration of the Theology of Pre-Christian Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 28.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Wyschogrod, *Abraham’s Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. R. Kendall Soulen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 184.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>25</sup> David Novak, *The Election of Israel: The Idea of the Chosen People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 189.

<sup>26</sup> See Elliott, 47-51, 58-72, 640.

<sup>27</sup> John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 52.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Moo, 675. See also Sigurd Grindheim, *The Crux of Election: Paul’s Critique of the Jewish Confidence in the Election of Israel* (Tübingen, Germany : Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 32.

Much of the disagreement arises from one's understanding of the nature of the people of God. It is at the crux of considerable theological debate, most notably the respective views of classic dispensationalism embracing two distinct peoples and reformed theology holding to a single people of God.<sup>30</sup> Others perceive the biblical text depicting diversity within unity in the people of God. Walter Kaiser has captured the essence of this principle in his emphasis on promise theology. He affirms:

But instead of continuing to say, as classical dispensationalism did, that there are two separate people (Israel and the church) with two separate programs (the earthly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom of our Lord), this view stresses that there is one people ("the people of God") with a number of discernable aspects within that one people (such as Israel and the church), and there is only one program of God (the "kingdom of God") with numerous aspects under that single program.<sup>31</sup>

This position is well-supported in Scripture. Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:28 that "there is neither Jew nor Greek" is often cited as proof that an ancestry to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob no longer matters.<sup>32</sup> But advocates generally fail to address fully the rest of the verse, which reads "there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Certainly Paul was not suggesting that the slaves who were part of that culture were free to run away without consequences. On the contrary, he exhorts slaves to obey their masters (Col 3:22). Likewise it would be foolish to conclude that men cease being men and women are no longer women when they come to faith. Consistency, a foundational principle of logic, then requires that the same must be true for Jews and Gentiles in Paul's list. In Galatians 3 and Romans 10 where Paul uses similar terminology, he writes about the nature of salvation being the same for all—Jews, Gentiles, slaves, masters, men and women are all saved the same way by grace through faith in Christ. But that does not negate specific distinctions within the body.

In the same way, God grants different spiritual gifts to individuals "that differ according to the grace given to us" (Rom 12:6; cf. 1 Cor 12:11). Persons with authority over others in a congregation have the same standing before the Lord (Rom 14:12; 1 Cor 12:27), but not everyone can serve as a pastor or an elder (Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:1-5). New believers are as fully saved as old believers, but they are not to lead a congregation (1 Tim 3:6). We are all called to be witnesses but not everyone is a missionary, which requires being sent by a body (Acts 13:1-3). None of these distinctions within the body contradict our common identity in Christ. The same is true for Jews and Gentiles. It is consistent, then, for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to retain a distinction from other members of the people of God in certain ways without violating the common identity we share in Christ.

Concerning Paul's writings on the remnant in Romans 11, Lanier Burns sums up the issue well by saying, "It is best to say that Israel did not become the church. Jews and Gentiles

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<sup>30</sup> Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids, MA: Zondervan, 1987), writing from a Reformed perspective, has attempted to find common ground between the two systems. He acknowledges the reality of "a very great distinction between Israel and the church. But the distinction is basically a historical one, not a metaphysical one." (p. 43). Thus, in his view, there is no present distinction between Israel and the church.

<sup>31</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "An Epangelical Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 367. For a detailed exposition of promise theology, see a Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> e.g. Gary M. Burge, *Jesus and the Land: The New Testament Challenge to "Holy Land" Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010), 81.

were uniquely joined as believers in a new entity that did not abolish distinctive identities and purposes.”<sup>33</sup> Once again, it is the remnant that establishes both the continuity of national election for Israel, and their place alongside Gentile believers in Jesus within the people of God.

### THE ROLE OF THE REMNANT IN RECONCILING THE ABRAHAMIC AND MOSAIC COVENANTS

The capstone of Paul’s argument in Romans 11 regarding God’s refusal to reject Israel in a national sense is given in the second half of verse 28. It is determined διὰ τοὺς πατέρας—“because of the fathers.” The specific reason cannot be the merits of the fathers, for he showed previously, “Abraham, our forefather in the flesh” had nothing to boast about (4:1,2). But he does give the reason (γὰρ) in 11:29, saying, “for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” The gifts are a reference back to a series of blessings in Romans 9:4,5.<sup>34</sup> Included among them are the covenants, which were made with the fathers on behalf of the nation. They are acknowledged as being ἀμεταμέλητα—literally something that God will never regret or change.

In that light, the election of national Israel and God’s love for the Jewish people are resolutely grounded, without possibility of revocation, on the commitment God made by virtue of His stated obligations to the fathers. It especially relates to the covenant God made with Abraham, then repeated to Isaac and later to Jacob, always with the full nation in view as expressed in the recurring clause, “you and your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7-10,12; 28:4; 35:12; 48:4), and also marked by the phrase spanning time: “throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant” (בְּרִית עוֹלָם – Gen 17:7,13,19).<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the Abrahamic Covenant was based on the sovereignty of God, not on Israel’s faithfulness. This foundational principle is reflected in a number of ways, including the format of the covenant following a Royal Land Grant agreement common in the Ancient Near East,<sup>36</sup> the ratification of the covenant being unilateral on God’s part (Gen 15:12-21), and the covenant being given as an unbreakable oath by God:<sup>37</sup>

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore

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<sup>33</sup> J. Lanier Burns, “The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 228.

<sup>34</sup> See Murray, 101. These gifts are “the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh.” Likewise, the major callings of Israel are being a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6) and “a light to the nations” (Isa 49:6).

<sup>35</sup> Some argue that although עוֹלָם normally means “everlasting,” it can also mean “a long time,” thus implying an endpoint of the covenant. But in passages that convey the sense of unending perpetuity beyond the constraints of a lifetime, additional terms are used by the authors to expand the temporal scope. These markers include the use of עַד (i.e. לְעוֹלָם וָעַד – “The LORD shall reign forever and ever” in Ex 15:18), זְרַעְךָ אַחֲרֶיךָ – “your descendants after you” (Gen 35:12), and לְדוֹרֹתָם – “throughout their generations” (Gen 17:9). These markers of unending permanence are evident in each of the passages associated with the Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>36</sup> See Bruce Waltke, “The Phenomenon of Conditionality,” in *Israel’s Apostasy and Restoration*, Avraham Gileadi, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) 124; and Moshe Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90 (1970), 185.

<sup>37</sup> In biblical times, oaths (שְׁבָעוֹת) were considered to be unconditional in nature and without any contingency for breaking the commitment. So they were absolute and legally binding. Swearing an oath meant that no matter what happened, you would do exactly as you said you would do. There was always an expectation of fulfillment, regardless of the circumstances.

by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and I will surely multiply you. . .’ In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us” (Heb 6:13-14,17; cf. Gen 22:16-18; Deut 9:5).

Foundational to the Abrahamic Covenant, then, is the security of the promise of Israel’s national election based on God’s name, character and actions. Such was the state of Israel’s election in Paul’s day, without any basis given for subsequently being rescinded.<sup>38</sup> But as Kaiser has shown, the Abrahamic Covenant never came with a free pass concerning behavior and belief:

Israel’s privileged position was not to be taken for granted, for while the promise of God was secure, those who would not participate in that promise by faith were not secure. There was always a difference between *transmitting* the promise from one generation to another and personally *participating* in that promise by faith, thereby enjoying the benefits of those promises.<sup>39</sup>

The Mosaic Covenant, on the other hand, introduced a different dynamic altogether. Because of their calling to be a “holy nation” (Ex. 19:6), disobedience to the Law would lead to curses (Lev 26:14-39; Deut 28:16-68), and ultimately their destruction (Deut 28:63).<sup>40</sup> These detrimental consequences for the nation paralleled the judgments in the Law that were decreed for the sinful behavior of individuals. Just as the most serious violations of the Law mandated individuals being “cut off” from the community (e.g. Ex 12:19; Lev 7:21) and even “cut off” from life itself (Ex 31:14; Lev 20:2,3), sins spreading to a national level would cause them to be “torn from the land” (Deut 28:63) and to “perish quickly” (Deut 28:20). The final result might appear to be a direct repudiation of the Abrahamic covenant: “Then you shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude, because you did not obey the LORD your God” (Deut 28:62; cf. Gen 15:5; 22:17; 26:4).

As history records, those warnings of judgment became a reality. So it is not insignificant for Paul to ask in Romans 11:1, “God has not rejected His people, has He?”<sup>41</sup> Even a rhetorical question necessitates a reason for asking it, as if there was at least the possibility of it being true, which in this case would be the national rejection of Israel.<sup>42</sup> In that regard, Richard Hays observes, “the letter’s rhetorical structure lures the reader into expecting Israel’s final

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<sup>38</sup> For a discussion of the irrevocable nature of the gifts and callings, see Grindheim. 161-2.

<sup>39</sup> Kaiser, *The Promise-Plan of God*, 314-5. See also Tuvia Zaretsky “Israel the People,” in *Israel, the Land and the People: An Evangelical Affirmation of God’s Promises*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1998), 45-47.

<sup>40</sup> The Mosaic Covenant follows the Suzerain Vassal Treaty format of Ancient Near East agreements in which conditional obligations were set by a suzerain (great king) and a vassal (lesser king). See George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh, PA: Biblical Colloquium, 1955).

<sup>41</sup> Paul’s use of this phrase is a quotation from Psalm 94:14 using the LXX (93:14). But he does not quote the second half of that verse, possibly as a *remez* (hint) interpretive method that was commonly used by Jewish writers and speakers of that era, including Jesus (e.g. His handling of Isa 62:11 and Zech 9:9 in Matthew 21:5). Using this method would either bring about the mental recall of the complete verse or lead the reader to refer to the passage in order to understand the correlation. Here, the second half of Psalm 94:14 reads, “Nor will He forsake His inheritance.” The inheritance of God is directly identified as ethnic/national Israel in Isa 19:25 and Joel 3:2.

<sup>42</sup> C.H. Cosgrove, “Rhetorical Suspense in Romans 9-11: A Study in Polyvalence and Hermeneutical Election,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 115 (1996) 271-287. Cosgrove shows how Paul utilized an ancient rhetorical method known as *communicatio* and *sustentatio* in which the author creates suspense by luring the audience down a plausible but false track of expectation, before rejecting it in a reasoned argument.



condemnation.”<sup>43</sup> With the severity of the curses of the Mosaic Covenant in view, such a rejection is seemingly apparent. Yet according to the unqualified promises made by God in the Abrahamic Covenant, He would preserve Israel as a nation forever. Either a major contradiction is embedded in Scripture, or a means of reconciling these disparate results is needed. That means is found in the remnant.

In keeping with the recurrent linkage of the concepts of remnant and divine judgment, the extent of judgment integral to the Mosaic Covenant is mitigated by those among Israel who remained faithful to God. They, too, would pass through the judgment of the nation, but just as they had turned to God in repentance (תשובה—from a root meaning “to turn”), they would return as a renewed nation and begin again.<sup>44</sup> Subsequent to the aforementioned depictions of judgment related to the Mosaic Covenant, we encounter unequivocal language that because of the repentant remnant, God would remember His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Lev 26:42) and He “will not reject them” (v. 44; cf. Ps 9:4). This assurance is evident in other writings as well, such as the Essenes of Qumran. While they considered themselves to be the extant remnant of the second temple period, their perspective reflected a broader biblical understanding that God’s preservation of the remnant was an act of kindness for the sake of His covenant made with the forefathers of Israel.<sup>45</sup>

A foundational principle has been established, therefore, by the declared will of God—that the righteous remnant of Jewish men and women is the key for the concurrent realization of both the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.<sup>46</sup> Because of them, the serious nature of the Mosaic Covenant is not trivialized, and the promissory substance of the Abrahamic Covenant is kept intact. And it is the basis for Paul’s resolute answer to his rhetorical question concerning the rejection of national Israel, saying, μή γένοιτο—“May it never be” (Rom 11:1).

### THE PRESERVATION OF THE REMNANT AS A REFLECTION OF THE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

The parallels between the concepts of the remnant and salvation are strong. Both are a function of grace, not works (Eph 2:8; Rom 11:5,6). Just as salvation is accomplished by an efficacious act of God (Jn 6:44), the raising up of the remnant is fully a God-driven act reflected in His words in 1 Kings 19:18, “I will leave. . .”<sup>47</sup> As a result, “the remnant has its origin, not in the quality of those saved, but in the saving action of God.”<sup>48</sup>

An analogous relationship also exists regarding the assurance of God’s preservation of both the redeemed and the people of Israel. In the same way that believers are “sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30) and confirmed “until the end” (1 Cor 1:8), God has promised to preserve the Jewish people. Jeremiah expresses it this way:

Thus says the LORD who gives the sun for light by day, and the fixed order of the moon and the

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 46.

<sup>44</sup> That dual meaning is reflected in Isaiah’s use of the term שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב—“a remnant shall return” (Isa 10:21).

<sup>45</sup> 1QM 13:8; 14:8-9.

<sup>46</sup> For further discussion on the remnant theme as mediating the tension between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, see Richard D. Patterson and Andrew E. Hill, *Minor Prophets: Hosea-Malachi*, vol. 10 of *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip Comfort (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 316.

<sup>47</sup> יְהוָה שָׁאֵר יָשׁוּב is written in the *hifil* stem, indicating causal action in the active voice.

<sup>48</sup> Volkmar Hertrich, “Leimma” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 203. See also Burns, 196.

stars by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of host is His name; if this fixed order departs from before Me,” declares the LORD, “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me forever” (Jer. 31:35-36).

The 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah is given much prominence theologically, for it contains the prophecy of the New Covenant in which God’s law and righteousness is promised to be permanently written on the hearts of people (vv. 31-34). This covenant was ultimately fulfilled in the atoning death of Jesus (Lk 22:20; Heb 9:15). But the assurance of God’s preservation of the descendents of Israel in verses 35-36 was not written as a new subject, but is interrelated, as indicated by the use of כֹּה – “thus” at the beginning of verse 35.<sup>49</sup> This juxtaposition affirms a common commitment by God to all of His promises affirmed in this chapter, namely that they are as enduring as the perpetual nature of the universe itself. Contextually, then, the extent of salvation inherent in the New Covenant is only as sure as the preservation of the people of Israel. But as we have seen, without the steadfast presence of the remnant, the preservation of Israel as a nation would not be possible. Ultimately, then, the remnant serves as an indicator of God’s assurance of the salvation of all believers.

### MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

#### **A proper understanding of the remnant provides a basis for showing how Jewish believers in Jesus are still Jews**

A widely held perception in rabbinic Judaism is that Jewish believers in Jesus are no longer part of the Jewish community. This belief is fueled, in part, by the position held by some Christians that God has replaced Israel with the church in His redemptive plan. So when Wyschogrod interacts with New Testament passages, he fails to recognize, in Romans 9:6-8, for example, that Paul was speaking about the righteous remnant *within* physical Israel, not the church as a *new* Israel replacing the former.<sup>50</sup>

Some Christian commentators share that same view. Calvin removed the identity of the remnant from its ethnic frame of reference and interprets it only as a reference to “the people of God.”<sup>51</sup> John Paul Heil separates Jewish believers in Christ from Jewish non-believers, because, in his view, the terms “Israel” and “Israelite” in the book of Romans never refer to “Christ-believing Jewry.” He limits the terms only “to those Jews who have not yet believed in Christ.”<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, in this way of thinking, Messianic Jews are not part of Israel. But it arises from an inadequate understanding of the remnant, and it would even have to deny that the Apostle Paul was still part of Israel. For in the only two passages in Romans where Paul addresses the subject, he establishes himself as an exemplar of the remnant and then emphasizes his physical heritage, calling the Jewish people “my kinsmen according to the flesh” (9:3) and himself “an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin” (11:1).

The irony in the misunderstanding regarding Messianic Jews is that the remnant is consistently described in Scripture as the ones who remain true to their Jewish heritage through their faith in YHWH and maintain cultural practices that are consistent with His instructions, unlike those within the community who turn to other gods and syncretize their religion. The

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<sup>49</sup> This adverb is primarily used as a pointer to what is to follow. See BDB, 462.

<sup>50</sup> Wyschogrod, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin, *Romans*, 321.

<sup>52</sup> John Paul Heil, “From Remnant to Seed of Hope for Israel: Romans 9:27-29,” *CBQ* 64 (2002); 707.

same is true today, as Messianic Jews demonstrate the same kind of faith and faithfulness as the Jewish remnant of long ago. In that regard, Richard Sneen has observed: “The Hebrew Christians, the remnant, are neither heretics nor an embarrassment, but that visible sign of God’s faithfulness to his ultimate purpose to save ‘all Israel.’”<sup>53</sup>

### **A proper understanding of the remnant shows the way to the restoration of Israel’s relationship to God**

Contemporary Judaism clings to the hope of the restoration of national Israel in a true covenant relationship with God, but seems to lack a cogent position on the nature of that restoration. As Novak acknowledges: “All that can be known about the final redemption, then, is that the estrangement between God and Israel will be ultimately overcome.”<sup>54</sup> This uncertainty results from the error of disregarding the concept of the remnant.

In Jewish thought today, very little writing on the subject of the remnant exists. This omission contributes to theological positions in Judaism lacking an emphasis on individual faith as a building block for national redemption. But the Bible is clear in showing that the restoration of Israel’s relationship to God shares the same basis as the reconciliation between individuals and God. Just as “a remnant shall return” (Isa 10:21) on a national level, individuals are called to “repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19).

By emphasizing the history and the character of the remnant, Christian witness can restore the focus of the Jewish community to the biblical message. The remnant of Jews who return to God in genuine faith and believe in His redemptive plan, as fulfilled in Jesus, are not just a testimony of the personal life-changing power He offers. They are showing the way of national restoration to the greater Jewish community foreseen by Paul when he said, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

### **A proper understanding of the remnant corrects the error of dual covenant theology**

A key factor in the historical tension between Christians and Jews is the perception that Christianity has superseded Judaism, which, understandably, is anathema for the Jewish community. As a result, ecumenically-oriented Christians desiring harmony between the two groups have promoted dual covenant theology that affirms all branches of Judaism as possessing a means of redemption that is fully equivalent to Christianity.<sup>55</sup> In this way of thinking, Jews obtain spiritual redemption through observance of the Mosaic Covenant while salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, as articulated in the New Covenant, applies to Gentiles alone, thus making it unnecessary for Jews to believe in Jesus. The end result is the denial of the need for Christians to communicate the gospel message to Jews, instead relegating evangelism to all other people

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<sup>53</sup> Richard Sneen, “The Root, the Remnant, and the Branches,” in *Word & World* Vol. 6, No 4 (Fall, 1986), 409.

<sup>54</sup> David Novak, “The Election of Israel: Outline of a Philosophical Analysis,” in Daniel H. Frank, ed., *A People Apart: Chosenness and Ritual in Jewish Philosophical Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 38.

<sup>55</sup> Some sources attribute this position to Maimonides in the Twelfth century, but he supported redemption for Gentiles only through observance of the Noachide Laws (*Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings* 8:10). It was first proposed in 1921 by the Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press 2005). Subsequent advocates include James Parkes, *Judaism and Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Hans J. Schoeps, *Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) and Marcus Barth, *Israel and the Church* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: the Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974).

groups.<sup>56</sup>

Dual covenant positions necessitate disavowing all declarations in Scripture that affirm a singular way of salvation (e.g. Jn 10:9; 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5). But a well-articulated role of the remnant in theology counteracts that flaw by retaining fidelity to the entire Word of God, rather than resorting to what David Stern calls, “unacceptable violence to the plain sense of the text.”<sup>57</sup>

The biblical concept of the remnant integrates properly with all Biblical passages of a soteriological nature. It consistently demonstrates that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles regarding the need for salvation—“*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23) and its realization through faith by believing in Jesus—“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him” (Rom 10:12). Those words have been aptly restated in this contemporary manner: “If Jesus is not the Messiah for the Jewish people, then neither is He Christ for the nations. Either Jesus is the Messiah for all, or He is not the Messiah at all.”<sup>58</sup>

In every generation, even in the midst of great chastening, a righteous remnant of Jewish men and women has always persevered. The concept is woven into the very fabric of the entire Word of God. The remnant serves a major role within God’s redemptive plan for humanity and for the testimony to Jewish people in particular. It only seems reasonable, then, that both our theology and our practice reflect a biblically accurate and effective understanding of the concept of the remnant.

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<sup>56</sup> For an example of this position, see Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976). From a similar Roman Catholic perspective, see “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of ‘Nostra Aetate,’” No.4.

<sup>57</sup> David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), 197.

<sup>58</sup> *Jewish Evangelism: A Call to the Church, Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 60*, eds. David Claydon and Tuvya Zaretsky (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 2005), 19.