

ROMANS II & ISRAEL'S 'FALL'

Dwight A. Pryor

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Recently my wife and I attended a lecture in Jerusalem by a well-known commentator on the prophetic Scriptures relating to the restoration of Israel in the last days. In the course of his stimulating discourse on Israel as a banner to the nations, he spoke of “Israel’s fall” and the consequent benefits to the nations (Gentiles). His reference, of course, was to Romans 11:11-12.

*I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid:
but [rather] through their fall salvation [is come] unto the Gentiles,
for to provoke them to jealousy. Now if the fall of them [be] the riches
of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles;
how much more their fullness? [KJV]*

The word *fall* struck a dissonant note to my ear. Based on my studies of Romans it did not ring true to speak of “Israel’s fall” when Paul seems so forcibly to argue against that view in his challenging discourse of chapters 9-11.

When I looked at the King James translation (the one used by the speaker), I noted that Paul says first that Israel did “*not fall*”—God forbid—but then adds that, yes, by their “*fall*” salvation and riches came to the nations. Read at face value this statement seems contradictory. Did Israel fall or did it not?

For clarification I searched the Greek text of Romans 11. The results were illuminating on a couple of fronts, and bear significantly, I believe, on our Christian attitude toward Israel.

A Fall or A False Step?

First, the word “fall” in the opening sentence of verse 11 is from the Greek *pipto* (falling down, falling from one level to another), which is used as a counterpoint to the preceding word, *ptaio* (stumble). However the KJV’s “fall” in the second and third sentences is not from the word *pipto* (fall), but *paraptoma* (misstep or false step).

*I say then, Have they stumbled (ptaio) that they should fall (pipto)?
God forbid: but [rather] through their fall (paraptoma) salvation
[is come] unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy. Now
if the fall (paraptoma) of them [be] the riches of the world, and the
diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their
fullness? [KJV]*

The Authorized Version’s rendering of *paraptoma* as “fall” suggests a subtle but significant bias against Israel and prejudices the reader’s orientation. It should be noted that the Apostle Paul does not share this bias; to the contrary he vigorously opposes this very attitude among the Gentile believers in Rome, that the Jewish people have failed, and God therefore has rejected or replaced Israel as His covenant people. The Jewish Apostle to the Gentile world argues vigorously that Israel is forever beloved of God. *YHWH* remains faithful even when *Yisrael* is fickle, because His sovereign election of the Jewish people is not contingent on repentance but is irrevocable.

The Apostle’s point then in verses 11-12 is that Israel has *not fallen* but *stumbled*—specifically with respect to the righteousness of God (His saving covenantal faithfulness) and the Messianic identity and atoning sacrifice of Yeshua—and that this *misstep* on their part has brought salvation and riches to the Gentiles joined to Messiah and thereby grafted into the olive tree of Israel’s faith and heritage. All this, in Paul’s perspective, is by the sovereign will of God.

Of the translations I checked, only the NRSV captures the proper sense and flow of Paul’s argument:

*So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means!
But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles,
so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their stumbling means
riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles,
how much more will their full inclusion mean! [NRSV]*

A False Step or A Transgression?

In checking multiple translations of Romans 11:11-12, a second issue emerged that also in my view reflects a biased Christian reading of the text. Remember, the KJV (and the NKJV) renders *paraptoma* (misstep or false or wrong step) as “fall”. But notice how the New International Version translates it:

*Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?
Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation
has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their
transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means
riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their
fullness bring!*

The NIV “transgression” is rendered by the RSV and ESV as “trespass”:

*So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall?
By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has
come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if
their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure
means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full
inclusion mean!*

How is this possible? As if “fall” were not bad enough, now we have the overlay of moral failure imposed on Israel, as “trespass” or “sin.”

Israel’s Sin or God’s Sovereignty?

A common derivative meaning of *paraptoma* in the Greek is “transgression or sin”—i.e., the result of making a wrong step with respect to God’s law. We find this usage, for instance, in Romans 4:25, speaking of our Lord, “who was handed over because of our *transgressions*.” Also, in the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:15) we find, “if you do not forgive others your Father will not forgive your *trespasses*.”

Linguistically therefore the NIV and ESV translations are defensible; but theologically and within the bigger picture of Romans 11, they fall short of the mark and reflect a pervasive Christian bias against Israel and a pejorative reading of the passage.

For the Apostle Paul the overriding issue in Romans 11 is not Israel's failure or moral culpability but rather the inscrutable and unsearchable ways of God—how He, in unexpected ways, has kept promises to Israel as His elect covenant people, while at the same time showing mercy to the other nations, and in so doing, will bring His intended fullness of salvation to Israel! It is a wonderful mystery, now revealed in the illumination of the risen Jesus. Paul's focus in this passage is not Israel's culpability but YHWH's sovereignty!

For too long the Church has denigrated Israel's "sin" and "stubbornness," in contrast to its righteousness and repentance. Even our great theologians of generations past dismissed Romans 9-11 as a parenthetical aside in Paul's explication of how individuals get saved by grace (in contrast to Israel's insistent demand for works). Israel has been relegated to the dustbin of covenantal history, or put on a dispensational shelf awaiting some eschatological consummation. But for Paul, Israel is not the culprit; rather God is the Agent.

A quick survey of the verbs in Romans 11 demonstrates Paul's emphasis—not upon Israel's moral culpability but upon God's sovereign actions:

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. [2]

*The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened,
as it is written,*

*"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day." [7-8]*

*So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall?
By no means! But through their stumbling
salvation has come to the Gentiles . . . [11]*

*But if some of the branches were broken off,
and you, although a wild olive shoot,
were grafted in among the others . . . [17]*

*. . . if God did not spare the natural branches,
neither will he spare you. Note then the
kindness and the severity of God: severity
toward those who have fallen, but God's
kindness to you, provided you continue in
his kindness. . . . for God has the power to
graft them in again. [21-23]*

*Lest you be wise in your own conceits,
I want you to understand this mystery, brothers:
a partial hardening has come upon Israel,
until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.
And in this way all Israel will be saved . . . [25-26]*

. . . As regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. [28]

*God has consigned all to disobedience,
that he may have mercy on all. [32]*

Notice how nearly all the active verbs relate to God: He rejects not; He hardens hearts, blinds eyes and dulls ears; He breaks off branches and grafts in branches and will re-graft natural branches; He shows both kindness and severity; He consigns to disobedience and He shows mercy to all. The children of Israel on the other hand are beloved by God, their election sure and unconditional, and in some manner all Israel shall be saved. They bear responsibility of course for their choices; but even Israel's stumbling—not unto a fall—is construed by Paul within the bigger picture of God's divine ordination.

This expansive view and insightful penetration into God's mysterious sovereignty with respect to Israel and the nations pushes Paul to the precipice of resounding doxological proclamation:

*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!
. . . For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be glory forever. Amen. [33, 36]*

Words and Worldviews

Three points I would make in closing.

First, in view of all that has been said above, and considering the specific context of Paul's metaphor of Israel's stumbling-but-not-falling, surely it is permitted and even preferable to translate *paraptoma* in verses 11-12 as "misstep" or "false step" —and not the more prejudicial "trespass" or "transgression." And certainly not "fall" as in the

KJV and NKJV. These commonly used terms betray a bias against Israel that does not do justice to the author of Romans, Paul, or to the readers of his epistle.

Secondly, symbols bind up reality for us, and words are powerful symbols. We should exercise caution in our language about Israel, Jews and Judaism. We must be cognizant of and take responsibility for a terrible history of Christian contempt and anti-Semitism, and always look for opportunities to bring *tikkun* or mending to our broken relationships. We should become sensitized to that history and prejudice even as it is reflected in the translations of Scripture.

Finally, as part of the ongoing Hebraic renewal of the Church we must rethink Paul. He was *not* anti-Judaic in his theology nor anti-Semitic. God forbid! In his critiques of Israel and his Jewish opponents, Paul speaks from *within* the Jewish community, not as an outsider. He speaks with the pathos and the passion of Israel's prophets, like Jeremiah, as one within and concerned for the well being of Israel. Paul is not a "convert" from Judaism to Christianity; nor does he as a "Christian" turn and attack his former faith, Judaism.

In his own day Paul was misunderstood and maligned even by many of his fellow Jewish believers in Yeshua. He was accused of forsaking the traditions and the Torah, and urging other Jews to do likewise. By his personal testimony and that of James, however, we know this was not true. Nonetheless, through the centuries Paul has been the favorite son of many opposed to Jews and Judaism, and even the hero of some outright anti-Semites, like the 2nd-century Gnostic Church leader, Marcion.

Let us get this straight. Paul was *philo-Semitic*! He was a lover of Israel, of the Jewish people and the Jewish scriptures. Should not we, too, assume a philo-Semitic stance when reading his letters? To presume otherwise is to bend us toward a misreading of the Apostle and to tip us in the direction of contempt and mischaracterization of Jews and their God-given faith.

Israel is beloved of God, and His love is everlasting. Therefore Christians should love the Jewish people as well—not because of their place in prophetic end-time scenarios, but because of their place in the Father's heart. Paul teaches us this foundationally important truth. We would do well to learn it.

Dwight A. Pryor is the Founder and President of the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies, Dayton, Ohio. Additional articles and commentary by Dwight can be found at www.jcstudies.com.