ALLIANCE THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A *SONDERWEG* FOR ISRAEL?

A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF THE BI-COVENANT VIEW OF SALVATION IN ROMANS 11:25-27

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NT 631: ROMANS (ENGLISH TRACK)

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25 For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; **26** and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written,

"THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION,
HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB."
27 "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM,
WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS."

Romans 11:25-27 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of the early church, the dominant interpretation of the Apostle Paul's letters has been from the perspective of the triumph of Christianity. According to this interpretation, Christians have superseded, or replaced, Jews as the chosen people of God. Jews are no longer the bearers of God's promise of salvation and their only hope for salvation lies in becoming Christian.[1] The church is not co-elect with the synagogue; rather, it has inherited the synagogue's election and, as Lutheran scholar Johannes Aagaard argues, is the "sole eschatological reality."[2]

The events of the Holocaust have led some post-war theologians to challenge this traditional interpretation by arguing that the covenantal promises still apply to Israel and that Judaism and Christianity play equally important roles in salvation history.[3] With various nuances, these "bi-covenant" theologians contend that Jews and Christians relate to God through two distinct, yet complementary, covenants. Accordingly, there are two valid paths to salvation – one

[1] John G. Gager, "Paul's Contradictions – Can They Be Resolved?" *Bible Review* 14 (2000), 33.

[2] Donald G. Bloesch, "'All Israel Will Be Saved': Supersessionism and the Biblical Witness." *Interpretation* 43, no. 2 (April 1989), 131.

[3] Bloesch, "All Israel Will Be Saved," 139; Gavin D'Costa, "One Covenant or Many Covenants: Toward a Theology of Christian-Jewish Relations." *JES* 27 (3) (1990), 441.

for Jews through the Torah and the other for Gentiles through Jesus Christ.[4] Central to this view is Rom. 9-11 and particularly Rom. 11:26, which states that "all Israel will be saved."[5] But does the Apostle Paul hold out a "special way" for Israel's salvation, apart from faith in Christ? This paper seeks to critically examine the principal exegetical arguments offered by proponents of bi-covenantalism in connection with Rom. 11:25-27. It concludes that the salvation that Paul envisions for Israel cannot be seen as something distinct from that enjoyed by believing Gentiles. For Paul, there is no *Sonderweg* for Israel apart from faith in Christ.[6]

HISTORY OF BI-COVENANT INTERPRETATION

Often cited as an early advocate of bi-covenantalism, German-Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) argued that Judaism and Christianity are equally important in God's soteriological plan. After a near conversion to Christianity, Rosenzweig subsequently turned to Judaism and devoted his life to Jewish scholarship. Rosenzweig saw a unique, divinely decreed interdependence between Judaism and Christianity. Using the metaphor of a fire and its rays, he characterized Judaism as the fire that "burns in itself" and Christianity as the "rays that stream into the world." According to this perspective, Jews are already in possession of God's special revelation in the Torah. However, because Judaism is inwardly-focused, Christianity - given its missionary ethos - is necessary for the sake of Gentile salvation. For Rosenzweig, Judaism and

[4] D'Costa, "One Covenant or Many," 442; Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 130.

[5] Terence L. Donaldson, "Jewish Christianity, Israel's Stumbling and the 'Sonderweg' Reading of Paul." *JSNT* 29, no. 1 (2006), 29. Throughout this paper, biblical citations are taken from the NASB translation.

[6] The term *Sonderweg* (German, "special way") was first used by Franz Mussner to refer to the salvation of Israel by Christ at his second coming. However, the term has since come to be used concerning the bi-covenant approach to Paul, and it is in this sense that it is used in this paper. (cf. Donaldson, "Jewish Christianity, Israel's Stumbling," 8).

Christianity are inextricably linked. He states, "Before God, therefore, both Jew and Christian are workers on the same task. He cannot dispense with either."[7]

In New Testament scholarship, prominent advocates of bi-covenantalism have been Krister Stendahl, Lloyd Gaston, and John G. Gager. Swedish theologian Krister Stendahl was among the first New Testament scholars to apply Rosenzweig's interpretive perspective to Paul. His 1963 article titled, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West" and subsequent works, particularly his 1976 book titled *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*, suggests that Paul's principal concern has been lost in the history of interpretation. According to Stendahl, whereas Paul was primarily concerned about the status of Gentile believers in the church and the relationship between the church and synagogue, the Apostle's statements have traditionally been read against the framework of late medieval piety. For Stendahl, it was such concerns, rather than a troubled conscience, that led to Paul's unique interpretation of the Torah. Stendahl further contends that "...the contrast in Paul is between Jews and Gentiles, or Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, but never between Jews and Gentile Christians."[8] In Stendahl's reconstruction, Paul does not "convert" to Christianity; he is only called as a Jew to work among the Gentiles and does not "fight against Judaism."[9]

Stendahl views Rom. 9-11 as the climax of the epistle, stating, "Paul's reference to God's mysterious plan is an affirmation of a God-willed coexistence between Judaism and Christianity

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[7] Meir Seidler, "Eliah Benamozegh, Franz Rosenzweig and Their Blueprint of a Jewish Theology of Christianity." *HTR* 111, no. 2 (2018), 253.

[8] Krister Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West." *HTR* 56, no. 3 (1963), 204.

[9] Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 132.

in which the missionary urge to convert Israel is held in check."[10] One of Stendahl's primary concerns is the relationship between the church and Jews, and he writes to "get at the roots of Christian anti-Semitism."[11] It should be noted, however, that Stendahl has since distanced himself from bi-covenantalism, suggesting that it reads too much into Paul's writings.[12]

Lloyd Gaston extends Stendahl's argument into an interpretive framework in which the Apostle Paul is understood to have believed in two distinct and separate paths to salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Gaston's interpretive approach is influenced by his underlying belief that the task of exegesis post-Holocaust is to "expose the explicit or implicit anti-Judaism inherent in the Christian tradition, including the New Testament itself."[13] In addition to being described as a bi-covenant or two-track approach, Gaston's interpretive framework has been characterized as ascribing a *Sonderweg* of salvation to Israel.[14]

Fundamental to Gaston's reconstruction is the assertion that Paul's letters are explicitly addressed to Gentiles, which implies that Paul's comments regarding the Torah should be understood in this context rather than viewed as a broad critique of Judaism.[15] Similar to Stendahl, Gaston argues that Paul did not think of his divine commission as a "conversion" from Judaism to Christianity, but rather as a prophetic calling to be an Apostle to the Gentiles.[16] As such, Paul's

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[10] Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*, 4.

[11] Stendahl, 126.

[12] Donaldson, "Jewish Christianity, Israel's Stumbling," 29.

[13] Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 2.

[14] Donaldson, 28.

[15] According to Donaldson, "This interpretive move has the effect of removing great swatches of Pauline material from any discussion of whether Paul criticized Jews for not believing in Christ." Donaldson, 31.

[16] Gaston. *Paul and the Torah*, 7.

foremost concern was the right of Gentiles to full inclusion among God's people, without adoption of the Torah.

According to Gaston, the dominant Christian reading of Paul's letters as opposing Judaism developed out of the early church seeking to legitimize itself by denying Judaism.[17] In his view, Paul never criticizes the Torah or Israel, "but simply bypasses them as not directly relevant to his gospel."[18] Gaston does not overlook all of Paul's positive statements about the righteousness of God in Christ. However, he suggests that such statements do not imply anything negative about, nor do they deny, the righteousness given through the Torah to Israel.[19] To maintain this dualism in Paul's thought, Gaston contends that Paul did not believe Jesus to be the Jewish Messiah, but rather the fulfillment of divine promise concerning the Gentiles.[20]

Inspired by Lloyd Gaston and also motivated by a desire to rescue Paul from charges of anti-Semitism, scholar John G. Gager argues that the traditional interpretation of Paul against Judaism is the result of reading Paul's letters out of their original context and forgetting that, as Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul's primary concern was the new status of Gentiles in Christ, not the status of Israel. The "Gaston-Gager hypothesis," as it has come to be known, proposes that Paul had no essential critique of Judaism and only desired to produce a "Moses for the masses."[21] Gager criticizes interpreters for subordinating Paul's pro-Israel statements (cf. Rom. 7:12, 9:4, 11:1, 11:26) to those which are anti-Israel (cf. Rom. 3:20, 9:31) and argues instead that Paul's "attacks" on the Torah are directed at Judaizers, not all Jews, and only apply to the Torah as a means for

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[17] Gaston, 7-8.

[18] Gaston, 33.

[19] Gaston, 33, 78.

[20] Gaston, 33.

[21] Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 42.

Gentile salvation. Such criticisms have no bearing on Torah observant Jews.[22] Moreover, Gager observes that Paul never speaks of God as having rejected Israel (cf. Rom. 11:1) in favor of a new, chosen people, nor does Paul state unequivocally that "all Israel will be saved" through Jesus Christ. These observations support Gager's conclusion that "Just as he [Paul] can no longer think of salvation for Gentiles in terms of the Mosaic covenant, so he does not imagine salvation for Jews occurring through their acceptance of Jesus."[23]

A *SONDERWEG* READING OF ROMANS

The *Sonderweg* view is based almost exclusively on Romans 9-11.[24] While an exhaustive critique is beyond the scope of this paper, this section aims to critically examine the principal exegetical arguments offered by its proponents in connection with Rom. 11:25-27, broadly considered as the climax of these chapters. These arguments concern: (1) the absence of the name 'Jesus Christ'; (2) the basis for Israel's hardening; and (3) the identity of the 'Deliverer' from Zion.

The Absence of the Name 'Jesus Christ'

Stendahl observes that there is no mention of Jesus Christ beginning in Rom. 10:18 through to the final doxology in Rom. 11:36. He states, "...Paul does not say that when the time of God's kingdom, the consummation, comes Israel will accept Jesus as the Messiah. He says only that the time will come when 'all Israel will be saved' (11:26)." This, Stendahl argues, is consistent with the rhetorical purpose of the entire section - to check Gentile arrogance directed towards Jews.[25] Gager agrees with Stendahl, stating, "Paul never speaks of Israel's redemption in terms of Jesus.[26]

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[22] Gager, "Paul's Contradictions," 37.

[23] Gager, 37.

[24] Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 130.

[25] Stendahl, 4.

[26] Gager, 37.

In the *Sonderweg* reading, Paul's confident hope for Israel's salvation is based on God's covenant promises to the patriarchs, since "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Rom. 11:28-29).[27]

That Christ is not explicitly mentioned in this section fails to demonstrate that Paul has in mind a parallel means of salvation for Israel. A proper understanding of Romans depends on reading the letter as a whole, including earlier sections in which the name of Christ is very much present and salvation is defined in terms of Christ.[28] For example:

- Rom. 3:21-26: salvation is available to all through God's righteousness in Christ;
- Rom. 5:1,9,11: through Christ, believers are both justified by and reconciled to God;
- Rom. 8:1: believers in Christ are rescued from condemnation; and,
- Rom. 10:4: Christ in the goal of the Torah for everyone who believes.

Furthermore, in Rom. 10:9, the conditions for salvation are given explicit Christocentric meaning: "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Faith in Christ is the only way to salvation for both Jew and Gentile; for Paul, there is no distinction in the matter. Both Reidar Hvalvik and Christopher Zoccali suggest that Paul expresses a similar understanding with the olive tree analogy (Rom. 11:17-24), in which the Apostle contrasts Israel's "unbelief" with the "faith" of the Gentile believers and states that non-believing Jews would be "grafted in" if they too responded in faith.[29]

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[27] Moo, 157.

[28] Donaldson, 29.

[29] Reidar Hvalvik, "A 'Sonderweg' for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25-27." *JSNT* 12, no. 38 (January 1990), 90; Christopher Zoccali, "'And so All Israel Will Be Saved': Competing Interpretations of Romans 11.26 in Pauline Scholarship." *JSNT* 30, no. 3 (2008), 299.

Moreover, the absence of a distinct Christological element in Rom. 11:36 is not unique, as Weima observes that God is the most common object of praise in New Testament doxologies.[30] In this case, the doxology serves to mark the end of one unit emphasizing that salvation is available for all who believe in Christ (Rom. 10:9) and the beginning of a new unit exhorting believers to live in a manner consistent with their new Christian identity. Notably, Paul employs similar confessional language in 1 Cor. 8:6 that explicitly includes Christ in the divine identity as both creator and sustainer.

The Basis for Israel's Hardening

Israel's "hardening" (Rom. 11:25; KJV: "blindness") as the reason that salvation has come to the Gentiles is the divine consequence of her "transgression" (Rom. 11:11-12) - a term that Paul uses elsewhere in Romans to describe the knowing violation of a particular standard or law.[31] Paul demonstrates in Rom. 10:18-21 that Israel's failure is not the result of blind ignorance; indeed, guilt is established based on the argument that Israel both heard (v. 18) and knew (v. 19) about God's purposes and yet did not believe.[32] In Gaston's analysis, this "hardening" refers to Israel's rejection of its missionary task to be a "guide" and "light" for the Gentiles (Rom. 2:19) by not recognizing what God was doing for the Gentiles in Christ.[33] Gaston states, "Had all Israel followed Paul's example, it may be that we would have had a Gentile church loyal to the righteousness of God expressed in Jesus Christ...alongside an Israel loyal to the righteousness of God expressed in the Torah."[34]

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[30] Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Paul the Ancient Letter Writer: An Introduction to Epistolary Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 140.

[31] Moo, 107.

[32] Moo, 147.

[33] Gaston, 146.

[34] Gaston, 33.

Gaston's shift in the basis for Israel's hardening - from its failure to respond to God's salvation in Christ to a rejection of its missionary task - has been widely criticized. Donaldson, for example, refers to it as being "more argumentative sleight-of-hand than substantive," and emphasizing a point that, for Paul, was secondary to his fundamental critique of Israel's rejection of the gospel.[35] Similarly, Zoccali argues that Gaston's interpretation "makes little sense" because it fails to adequately explain the necessity of Christ given the possibility of proselytism as a means by which Gentiles could participate in Israel's covenant. He states, "Israel's failure...possesses explanatory power only to the extent that Christ is seen as integral to both those historically outside Israel's covenant and to the very fulfillment of the covenant itself."[36] Gaston's analysis also overlooks the redemptive hope implicit in Paul's use of the hardening motif - that Israel might return to the Lord.[37] A similar idea is expressed in 2 Cor. 3:14-16, in which Paul writes that the veil covering Israel is removed only by believing in Christ.[38]

The Identity of the Deliverer from Zion

According to Paul's quotation of Isaiah in Rom. 11:26-27, Israel's salvation is brought about by the "Deliverer," who, in the bi-covenant reading, refers to God and not the returning Christ.[39] For both Stendahl and Gaston, the keyword is "covenant," a concept they assert that, for Paul, refers to the Mosaic covenant and applies only to ethnic Israel.[40] Surprisingly, Gaston

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[35] Donaldson, 35.

[36] Zoccali, "And so All Israel Will Be Saved," 300-301.

[37] Dan G. Johnson, "The Structure and Meaning of Romans 11." *CBQ*, no. 46 (1984), 96-97.

[38] Michael G. Vanlaningham, "Should the Church Evangelize Israel?: A Response to Franz Mussner and Other Sonderweg Proponents." *Trinity Journal* 22, no. 2 (2001), 206.

[39] Zoccali, 298.

[40] Gaston, 143-144.

concedes that, while Paul may have had Christ in mind in this verse, it is Christ precisely "as the agent of the "Sonderweg" of Israel's salvation."[41]

E.P. Sanders suggests that a bi-covenant reading requires Paul to have made a distinction not evident in Pauline theology. Sanders states, "To suppose that "the Deliverer" could be for Paul "God apart from Christ" seems to expect of him an unthinkable abstraction."[42] Similarly, Hvalvik argues that "the Deliverer" would almost certainly be understood Christologically by believers. He states, "...even if God is the intended subject, the missionary aspect cannot be excluded. God's salvation is offered to humankind - Jews and Greeks equally - through the preaching of the gospel."[43]

Although some commentators suggest that the quotation functions to provide additional detail about Israel's salvation, I concur with Hvalvik that this understanding is questionable.[44] Arguably, in its literary setting Paul's citation functions not to introduce new information, but rather - as the introducing clause "just as it is written" (v. 26) suggests - to substantiate claims already made. The citation draws from Isa. 59:20-21 and Isa. 27:9; however, the wording is Paul's own and reflects the Apostle's motivation to demonstrate through the Scriptures that Israel's salvation was promised beforehand. Paul's emphasis in v. 27 is on the promise of forgiveness that underlies redemption - a promise that, for Paul, is confirmed in Christ (Rom 15:8).[45] Hvalvik also observes that the removal of sin and ungodliness cited here forms a link to Romans 4, in

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[41] Gaston, 148.

[42] E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 194.

[43] Hvalvik, "A 'Sonderweg' for Israel," 91-92.

[44] Hvalvik, 95-96.

[45] Moo, 157.

which similar language is found concerning justification by faith.[46] Just as the salvation of the Gentiles depends on faith, one should conclude that so does that of Israel - "for there is no partiality with God." (Rom. 2:11).

CONCLUSION

Bi-covenantalism maintains that there are two distinct and separate paths to salvation - one for Jews through the Torah, the other for Gentiles through Jesus Christ. Integral to this debate is Rom. 11:25-27, the climax of Rom. 9-11, which has been argued as supporting a special way for Israel's salvation apart from faith in Christ. Many find this construction of covenantal reality to be not only theologically appealing but also a necessary correction to the triumphalism and anti-Semitism characteristic of traditional Pauline interpretation.

The interpretive stance taken by Stendahl, Gaston, and other proponents depends heavily on reading Rom. 11:25-27 in isolation from the rest of the epistle as a whole. However, meaning does not occur in a vacuum. Selections of biblical texts can best be understood when viewed as part of a larger literary and canonical whole. As this paper has argued, the principal exegetical arguments offered by proponents of bi-covenantalism fail to demonstrate that Paul has in mind a parallel means of salvation for Israel. Stendahl correctly observes that the name Jesus Christ is absent from certain passages in Romans 10-11. However, it is equally true that throughout the preceding chapters salvation is expressed in terms of Christ. If Paul believed that Jews benefited from a separate means of salvation, then as Dan Johnson states, "he simply could not have made the claims he did" in earlier chapters regarding the universality of the gospel.[47] Indeed, bi-covenantalism requires being "saved" (Rom. 11:26) to have a different meaning than it does

[46] Hvalvik, 96.

[47] Johnson, "The Structure and Meaning of Romans," 102.

elsewhere in Romans, which is highly unlikely. Moreover, as the olive tree analogy aptly illustrates, Israel will be engrafted again if it does not persist in unbelief. For Paul, there is no *Sonderweg* for Israel apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

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