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I am the man who has seen affliction. All Israel will be saved!

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Lamentations chapter 3. I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has driven and brought me into darkness without any light. Surely against me he turns his hand again and again the whole day long.

He has made my flesh and my skin waste away. He has broken my bones. He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation.

He has made me dwell in darkness like the dead of long ago. He has walled me about so that I cannot escape. He has made my chains heavy.

Though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer. He has blocked my ways with blocks of stones. He has made my paths crooked.

He is a bear lying in wait for me, a lion in hiding. He turned aside my steps and tore me

to pieces. He has made me desolate.

He bent his bow and set me as a target for his arrow. He drove into my kidneys the arrows of his quiver. I have become the laughing stock of all peoples, the object of their taunts all day long.

He has filled me with bitterness. He has sated me with wormwood. He has made my teeth grind on gravel and made me cower in ashes.

My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. So I say, my endurance has perished.

So has my hope from the Lord. Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall. My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me.

But this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, says my soul.

Therefore I will hope in Him. The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust.

There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes and let him be filled with insults. For the Lord will not cast off forever.

But though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love. For he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men. To crush underfoot all the prisoners of the earth, to deny a man justice in the presence of the Most High, to subvert a man in his lawsuit, the Lord does not approve.

Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come? Why should a living man complain, a man, about the punishment of his sins? Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord. Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven. We have transgressed and rebelled and you have not forgiven.

You have wrapped yourself with anger and pursued us, killing without pity. You have wrapped yourself with a cloud so that no prayer can pass through. You have made us scum and garbage among the peoples.

All our enemies open their mouths against us. Panic and pitfall have come upon us,

devastation and destruction. My eyes flow with rivers of tears because of the destruction of the daughter of my people.

My eyes will flow without ceasing, without respite, until the Lord from heaven looks down and sees. My eyes cause me grief at the fate of all the daughters of my city. I have been hunted like a bird by those who were my enemies without cause.

They flung me alive into the pit and cast stones on me, waters closed over my head. I said, I am lost. I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit.

You heard my plea. Do not close your ear to my cry for help. You came near when I called on you.

You said, do not fear. You have taken up my cause, O Lord. You have redeemed my life.

You have seen the wrong done to me, O Lord. Judge my cause. You have seen all their vengeance, all their plots against me.

You have heard their taunts, O Lord, all their plots against me. The lips and thoughts of my assailants are against me all the day long. Behold their sitting and their rising.

I am the object of their taunts. You will repay them, O Lord, according to the work of their hands. You will give them dullness of heart.

Your curse will be on them. You will pursue them in anger and destroy them from under your heavens, O Lord. Like the chapters that preceded, Lamentations chapter 3 has an acrostic pattern.

Although it is more pronounced than chapters 1 or 2, it has 22 sets of three lines. Each set of three lines begins with the same letter in alphabetical sequence through the Hebrew alphabet. It's the central section of the entire book.

It doesn't have the same dirge elements of the other chapters of the book, but it does have elements of instruction, individual and communal lament, and wisdom. Its more disparate structures and genres mean that the unity of the chapter is most readily apparent in the tightness of its literary structure. If we look more closely, we will also see the unity of a movement.

Within the chapter, there are a number of changes and points of view. It begins with the first person singular speech in verses 1 to 24, moves to third person masculine speech in verses 25 to 39, then to first person plural speech in verses 40 to 47, before reverting to first person singular speech in verses 48 to 66. These changes in point of view represent natural transitions in the material of the chapter, but they don't require a change in the speaker, as the same person is almost certainly speaking throughout.

It is very important to recognise the transitions, however, as they represent

psychological transitions in the speaker. There are other striking transitions to be noted. For instance, the first 21 verses alternate between the first person singular of the speaker's references to himself, and continual third person masculine singular references to the Lord's acting and devastating judgement upon him.

But the name of the Lord only appears once, in verse 18. In verses 22 to 39, the I and Me of the speaker disappears, and third person masculine singular references to the righteous sufferer join the third person masculine references to the Lord. But now the Lord is repeatedly named, not merely appearing in pronouns as he or him.

This section involves a wisdom-flavoured reflection upon the manner of wise suffering, and what the sufferer has learned from it. The transition here is noteworthy. It is followed by a movement into the first person plural references to the people, especially in exhorting them to turn back to the Lord, while the references to the Lord start to shift to a second person singular form, you.

What may seem to be just meaningless changes in pronouns actually traces the movement of the heart of the writer. The tensions of the chapter are finally resolved as the speaker resituates his first person references in a hopeful second person address to the Lord, in which the Lord's name is repeatedly mentioned. This chapter, which is the pivotal chapter of the book, thus represents a movement from the voice of futile lament to a positive and hopeful address to the Lord.

The intensity of the first person singular crisis that opened the chapter, where the Lord's identity is largely eclipsed by the bitterness of the speaker's experience, is answered by the intensity of the confident address of that person to the Lord at the end, where the Lord is foregrounded and the speaker retreats to the background. In the first half of the passage, the speaker shifts from a description of his experience of suffering and the heaviness of the Lord's hand upon him to a discussion of how a person should respond in such circumstances, of the Lord's steadfast love and character, and how the Lord acts towards such sufferers, reminding himself of the Lord's goodness. Perhaps one of the greatest questions hanging over our reading of the text is the identity of the man who describes his experience from verse 1 onwards.

While the book of Lamentations is about the desolation of Jerusalem and the captivity of Judah, the speaker here presents himself as the direct personal target of God's wrath. Comparing chapter 2 verses 11 to 19 with chapter 3 can be illuminating, as there are several similarities to be observed between these earlier verses and sections of chapter 3. For instance, the resemblance between chapter 2 verse 11 and chapter 3 verses 48 to 51. The speaker in chapter 2 verse 11 closely identifies with Jerusalem's suffering, even if not with the intensity that we see at the beginning of chapter 3. The speaker of the opening verses of this chapter seems to have been singled out by the Lord for judgment, despite the fact that the judgment in question was one that fell upon the entire people.

He stands for the whole people, even though he is just one person. He doesn't seem to be a personification of Jerusalem or Judah, nor a generic person. I'm inclined to hear the voice of Jeremiah himself here, representing the entire people in himself.

Jeremiah is the suffering prophet, and large sections of the book of Jeremiah describe the sufferings of the prophet himself, often in the most charged language. For instance, Jeremiah is led as a lamb to the slaughter, in chapter 11 verse 19 of his prophecy. Jeremiah is a man who, in contrast to most of the rest of the prophets, consistently bears his soul.

He describes the heaviness with which the message of the Lord lies upon him, in chapter 20 for instance. He also has a number of individual laments, or complaints, or confessions, as they have been called, of the type that we find in the Psalms. Jeremiah is the weeping prophet, the one established by God to stand against the people of his day as a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, but who is also established to stand for the people as he takes their suffering upon himself.

In Lamentations chapter 3, I believe that we are seeing an aspect of this. Jeremiah is the prophet who feels the painful blows of the judgment of the Lord before they fall upon the people. In Lamentations chapter 3, he is giving voice to his experience.

The speaker has been made to dwell in darkness like the dead on account of God's wrath. He has repeatedly been struck by the hand of the Lord, just as the city was besieged and enveloped by the Babylonians, so the prophet was besieged and enveloped by divine judgment. He has been brought down, as it were, to the state of the dead.

God brought the prophet into darkness. He also cornered him, blocking off all of his paths. God, the unnamed adversary of the prophet, acts towards the prophet as a hunter towards its prey, tracking him down, lying in wait for him, and destroying him.

God has given him bitterness and gravel to eat. The bitterness might remind us of the bitterness of the herbs of the Passover connected with Israel's affliction in Egypt. He has lost all peace and his old hope in the Lord has perished.

It's crisis time and how will he respond? In the verses that follow, the prophet moves beyond the crisis of his lament and the extinguishing of his hope to refounding his confidence upon the character of God, beginning to address the Lord. He rediscovers his confidence by reflecting upon the Lord's covenant faithfulness and mercies, reversing his loss of hope in verse 18. God's character is unchanging despite the prophet's crisis.

God's steadfast love and mercies never come to an end, but they are also new every morning. They're everlastingly renewed. They never grow old or fade.

Some people imagine God as if he were an old man in the heavens, but the eternity of

God is a youthful thing, a constant bubbling up where possibilities aren't exhausted, nor do they fade or become threadbare. They are always being restored. We may grow old, but God does not.

The prophet turns to this God as his portion and consequently his hope. Even as the earthly inheritance of Israel crumbles and perishes before its enemies, the Lord who is their portion endures in his unaltered youthfulness. Having so refounded his hope, the prophet turns to reflect upon what is good.

Each verse from verse 25 to 27 begins with the word good, recognising at the outset God's goodness, not just in a bare objective sense but also in a relational sense, that God is good to those who wait for and seek him. He turns to the goodness of acting accordingly, waiting patiently for God's salvation and bearing his judgment. In this section the first person singular of the prophet has been replaced by a third person masculine singular, as the prophet is drawn beyond the immediacy of his own suffering to reflect upon enduring truths in a wisdom-like discourse.

These claims are followed by a threefold general exhortation to the sufferer, which the prophet clearly is applying to his own experience. He ought to sit alone in silence, taking up the language used to describe the city of Jerusalem itself in chapter 1 verse 1, submitting to judgment and taking its blows upon himself. From this the prophet articulates a threefold rationale in the next section, each beginning with 4. The Lord will not cast off forever.

Though he causes grief, he will have compassion. Finally, the Lord does not take delight in afflicting men. He wishes to bless them.

God does not want to crush people underfoot, to deny them justice or to prevent their case from being heard by him. Judgment is not God's primary mode of action. In the New Testament and especially in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is like Jeremiah in a great many respects.

He declares judgment against the temple, describing it using the words of Jeremiah as a den of robbers. He again alludes to Jeremiah chapter 8 verse 13 in his judgment on the fig tree. In the final days of his life he is the prophet weeping over Jerusalem and warning it of its impending judgment.

He is beaten as Jeremiah and as Jeremiah was like a lamb led to the slaughter to be cut off from the land of the living, so also was Christ. He suffered on account of the people and with them. He felt the painful burden of the Lord's calling upon him and in places like chapter 20 he bitterly laments his life.

Finally, as we have seen in Lamentations chapter 3, Jeremiah feels within himself the full force of the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem, as if he himself were the city.

Matthew's crucifixion account alludes to the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem in Lamentations. Taking up Lamentations chapter 3 verse 19 and chapter 2 verse 15, Matthew presents Jesus as the embodiment of the fallen city of Jerusalem.

Jesus is presented as suffering the judgment of Jerusalem's exile himself. Jesus is the one who suffers a fate like the fate he declares will fall upon Jerusalem in the Olivet Discourse. The sky will be darkened over him.

He will be surrounded by his enemies on all sides. As the greater Jeremiah, he bears the force of the day of the Lord that awaits the unfaithful city, taking that judgment upon himself. Yet just as Jeremiah in Lamentations chapter 3, a confidence in God, even in that deepest of tribulation and distress, enables Jesus to await the mercies and steadfast love of the Lord's new morning, a morning when the desolate city would be restored and a third day on which the destroyed temple would be raised again.

As I've already noted, the psychological movement of the passage can be traced in the shifting pronouns and names. It begins with first person singular pronouns, I and me, and a flurry of third person singular masculine pronouns in reference to God, he, his, him. But the Lord's name is not used.

An inflection point in the Prophet's lament arises when he starts to address himself. He's no longer trapped in the immediacy of his trials. He can address the truth of the character of the Lord to himself and take comfort from it.

In entering into conversation with his soul, another voice can speak into his situation. That interior voice is not the immediate voice of suffering and distress. It's a voice that can bring up the resources of memory, conscience, faith, and reason and establish some clarifying distance upon his experience, speaking into it with insight that transcends it.

As that voice takes its place in the conversation, the first person singular, the I and the me, is replaced by a third person singular, he and him, and the name of the Lord and his character pierces the darkness of the suffering Prophet's distress. The Prophet now reflects upon firm truths that exceed his present situation. He can grasp onto these and live out patterns of behaviour appropriate to sufferers.

Verses 25 to 30. The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul who seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. Let him sit alone in silence when it is laid on him. Let him put his mouth in the dust.

There may yet be hope. Let him give his cheek to the one who strikes. Let him be filled with insults.

The Prophet goes on to acknowledge that all events ultimately come from the hand of

the Lord and that nothing exceeds the Lord's power. Both good fortune and disaster are ultimately from the Lord and we are in no position to blame him for the punishment of our sins. Indeed for a living man to do so is to neglect the grace by which he continues to enjoy life.

This is a source of comfort as the Prophet recognises that he and his people are not the playthings of a capricious fate but that even the worst things that could befall them ultimately come under the providence of a gracious and good creator who does not delight in destruction or disaster and who can restore the sufferer and bring balm to all wounds. At this point the sufferer also begins to recognise his own culpability. His suffering is related to the punishment of his sins.

No longer questioning the Lord's goodness he sees his own responsibility and at this point a further shift can occur. The Prophet who began with the immediacy of bitter first-person lament before addressing the truth of the Lord to himself and re-situating his experience in terms of more objective truths now shifts to the first-person plural and from reflection to exhortation. Let us test and examine our ways and return to the Lord.

Let us lift up our hearts and hands to God in heaven. The Prophet here calls people to the same self-examination and reflection that he has just been engaging in. They must stop fleeing from the Lord and return to him presenting themselves to him in fervent prayer.

And now the Lord who was the veiled cause of the Prophet's distress in the first 18 verses and the comforting object of his meditation in the verses that followed becomes the object of personal address. The third-person pronouns he and him are replaced by second-person address you. He is no longer talking about God he is exhorting and leading the community in praying to the Lord.

Now when he recounts his suffering and the suffering of his people it is no longer merely sterile lament. It is now being brought before the Lord and calling for his intervention. He has done X shifts to you have done X. When the Prophet returns to the first-person singular and relates his suffering again a new element appears.

He is now awaiting the Lord who will see his tears. His tears are no longer futile and bitter but a sort of prayer poured out before the Lord calling upon him to see the sufferer and to act on his behalf. He also returns to the language and imagery are being hunted with which he began the chapter.

However now it is not the Lord who is hunting him but his enemies and he is seeking out the Lord in his crisis. The Prophet has been flung alive into the pit the realm of death by those who were his enemies without cause. He has been buried and overwhelmed as though drowning in the watery abyss of death and in that position he calls upon the name of the Lord.

The Lord came near when the Prophet called and reassured him telling him not to fear. The Prophet can then declare with reawakened confidence and hope the Lord has taken up his cause and redeemed his life. The experience of being cast into or being trapped within the pit is one that is often employed as a metaphor in places like the Psalms.

For instance Psalm 88 verses 6 to 7. Being cast into a pit was also an experience that Jeremiah himself personally had in Jeremiah chapter 38 when he was placed in the cistern. The veiled he and the afflicted me with which the chapter began has become the you unveiled in salvation and the delivered me. The God that the Prophet was fleeing from as his hunter in the beginning of the chapter is now the Lord that the Prophet flees to in all of his distress.

The deeply personal character of the deliverance that the Prophet experiences at the end of the chapter mirrors the deeply personal crisis that he experiences at its beginning. The Lord's answer to him is an assurance to the entire people that they can turn back to the Lord and find relief in the same manner. This is the pivotal chapter of the book.

In this chapter the key corner is being turned. The prophetic sufferer who was trapped by his enemies felt the bitter blows of the Lord's punishment for the people's sins and called to the Lord in his distress. It reminds us of Jesus Christ.

Jeremiah and Joseph might have called upon the Lord in the darkness of their pits using words similar to those of the psalmist. Daniel in the lion's den was heard by God and protected from the lion's mouths. Jonah in the watery abyss of the sea in the belly of a great fish also called upon the name of the Lord and was delivered from it.

Our Saviour descended into a deeper far more terrible pit, a pit whose captives had never been released. However even as the gaping war of shields sought to swallow him up Jesus looked with confidence to the father who had afflicted him seeking his redemption from the grave. A question to consider, how can we follow the pattern of the Prophet's address to himself in this chapter learning to move beyond the immediacy of our distress? Romans chapter 11.

I ask then has God rejected his people? By no means for I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? Lord they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars and I alone am left and they seek my life.

But what is God's reply to him? I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal. So too at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. But if it is by grace it is no longer on the basis of works otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. 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.

And David says, let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see and bend their backs forever. 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? Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. In as much then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous and thus save some of them.

For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as first fruits is holy, so is the whole lump and if the root is holy, so are the branches. But if some of the branches were broken off and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root but the root that supports you.

Then you will say, branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in. That is true, they were broken off because of their unbelief but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud but fear.

For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God, severity towards those who have fallen but God's kindness to you provided you continue in his kindness, otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in.

For God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree? Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of 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. As it is written, the Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob, and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins. As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake.

But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have been

disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him, and through him, and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever.

Amen. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul declares that through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God has bared his holy arm before the nations and wrought salvation in fulfilment of his promises. This gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

It delivers the Jews from the condemnation of the Torah that they were under, and Gentiles from their state of exclusion, grafting them into the one people of God in which they share in the spiritual blessings of Israel. Yet at the heart of this glorious declaration of God's work of salvation lies troubling questions of divine faithfulness. For while the gospel is making inroads among the Gentiles under the ministry of Paul and others, the Messiah has largely been rejected by his own people.

Much of the later half of the book of Romans is devoted to addressing the question of how this perplexing state of affairs could come to be, and in Romans 11 this comes to its height. Paul recognises the troubling force of this challenge, something that raises questions about God's justice itself. If the Jews have been cast off, or stumbled so as to fall completely, as the situation might appear to some, then the very character of the covenant-keeping God is thrown into doubt, and a dark shadow is cast over the gospel itself.

In chapters 9-11 of Romans, Paul turns to address this question directly, tracing the story of Israel from its patriarchal origins through the Exodus and into the period running up to the exile. He demonstrates that from the very beginning Israel has been formed purely by unconditioned divine grace. God determined that Abraham's line would be called through Isaac, and chose Jacob over Esau his brother.

He raises up and brings low adversaries like Pharaoh to demonstrate his power. He can reduce the innumerable hosts of a rebellious people to a small remnant, and form a new people from those who were never a people. But how can this be squared with God's covenant commitment to his people? Paul begins to answer this by presenting himself, a Benjamite descendant of Abraham, as proof that God has not in fact rejected his people Israel utterly.

Then once again he turns to Israel's covenant history to locate parallels with the current situation. During the ministry of Elijah, for instance, God reassured the prophet that even though the nation had largely fallen away, he had reserved 7,000 faithful men as a

remnant. In much the same way, Paul maintains, God had reserved a chosen remnant of grace in his day.

However, the majority of the nation were hardened in judgment and suffered rejection. Paul proceeds to discuss the mysterious ways in which the conversion of the Gentiles and the stumbling of Israel fit into God's purposes. He denies that the stumbling of Israel occurred in order that they might fall.

Rather, it happened in order that the Gentiles might be included, and that through their inclusion Israel might be made jealous. Here we should recall Paul's reference to Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 21 in the preceding chapter. I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation.

With a foolish nation I will make you angry. Paul believes that his own ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles is involved in God's purpose in this regard. His mission is not merely performing the role of bringing in the Gentiles, but through the bringing in of the Gentiles, exciting his Jewish compatriots to jealousy, so that they too might be saved.

Paul employs the image of an olive tree, with natural branches cut off and wild branches grafted in to illustrate the situation in his day. The wild branches are grafted in contrary to nature, contrasting with the natural branches, which even if broken off could easily be grafted in again. The wild branches grafted in enjoy their place by a sort of double grace.

Not only are they supported by the root, as the natural branches are, but their very inclusion in the tree is solely by virtue of a radical act of gracious engrafting. Paul cautions Gentile believers not to vaunt themselves over the natural branches, knowing that the natural branches by virtue of their origin enjoyed by promise some sort of title to God's covenant riches that the Gentiles never possessed. In chapter 9 verses 4 to 5 Paul had enumerated the blessings and covenant privileges that were proper to his Jewish compatriots.

They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

The concept of jealousy plays an important role in Paul's developing argument. As graciously adopted children in the family of the covenant, Gentiles ought to act in a manner that provokes jealousy in the wayward natural sons. Faithful Gentiles manifesting the riches that the Jews rejected.

Even after they have largely rejected his gospel, Paul can make the most startling claims concerning natural Israel's status. For instance, in verses 28 to 29, as regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake, but as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just before his

argument erupts into its doxological crescendo, Paul declares a divinely established symmetry between the deliverance of Gentiles from their formerly unbelieving state, and the mysterious act by which, through the mercy shown to Gentiles, Israel itself might be shown the most remarkable mercy.

In verses 30 to 32, for just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Christians have differed in how they have made sense of Paul's argument in Romans chapter 11, arguably the crux text for discussions of the future of Israel.

The question of the identity of the all-Israel that Paul says is going to be saved in verse 26, is one that serves to manifest much of the range of different readings that are on offer. A minority of interpreters, John Calvin and N.T. Wright among them, have identified all Israel in verse 26 as the Jew plus Gentile people of God in Christ. Yet even though commentators like Wright may helpfully highlight some of the complexities that the gospel exposes and introduces in the definition of Israel, the readers of Romans could be forgiven for confusion at such a sudden shift in the meaning of a term that has been fairly stable in its reference to national Israel throughout Paul's argument to this point.

Others, like William Hendrickson, have argued that it refers to the full complement of Israel's remnant elect, who alone constitute true Israel. The fullness of Israel in verse 12 refers then to the complete number of the various remnants of elect Israelites over the centuries, rather than to any more general salvation of the people of Israel. As in the Jew plus Gentile people account of Wright and Calvin and others, national Israel mostly disappears in this account.

This, it seems to me, introduces serious problems into Paul's argument, as it is precisely the question of God's commitment to his promises to national Israel that are at issue. While the remnant may serve as an assurance that God isn't completely finished with national Israel yet, by themselves they certainly do not constitute a fulfillment of his commitment to the Jewish people. Devolving all old covenant promises onto the Messiah, a route that some others have suggested, seems to get God off the hook with technicality, but it undermines the very logic of the Messiah's representation in the process.

For God to strip the olive tree of almost all of its natural branches, and repopulate it with grafted wild branches instead, raises serious questions about the tree's continued identity. Even if we maintain that the Messiah is the root of the olive tree, bearing all of the branches, the olive tree is not reducible to its root, much as the body of Christ isn't merely reducible to its head. Paul is clear that the branches themselves, even while broken off, retain immense significance.

They are natural branches, continuing to belong to a tree that is deprived of something proper to it, as long as they are unattached to it. For Paul, they remain beloved for the sake of their forefathers, in verse 28, and they are holy on account of the forefathers, in verse 16. While the identity of Israel can be focused upon and borne by the Messiah, it cannot simply be alienated onto the Messiah.

As Paul says in the context, the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Indeed, Paul's claim in verse 15 suggests the most startling relationship between the Messiah and the nation of Israel, even in its state of rejection. The rejection of Israel is the reconciliation of the world, and their acceptance would mean life from the dead.

The story of the Messiah cast away for the reconciliation of the world is recapitulated in his people according to the flesh. Just as the Messiah was raised from death, so must Israel be, and when they are, it will mean resurrection. The symmetries with Paul's statement in verse 10 of chapter 5, for if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life, must be noted here.

Just as Gentiles were reconciled by the death of the Messiah, so they were reconciled on account of the rejection of Israel. Just as we were loved while enemies, so Israel is still now beloved, even though they are enemies of the gospel. The people of Israel still have a part to play in redemptive history, a part to which the deep narrative logic of their national story determinately gestures forward.

This event of Israel's restoration causes Paul's argument in Romans 11 to ascend into the ecstatic heights of praise. It is an event that supposedly heralds a far more exceeding blessing for the world than their trespass ever did, as Paul argues in verse 12. If their trespass meant that salvation came to the Gentiles, their restoration must be remarkable in its effects.

It is, as I have noted, an event spoken of in language redolent of Christ's own death and resurrection, an event that after the reconciliation of the world entailed by the rejection, will entail life from the dead, in verse 15. Paul speaks of this event in the grandest of terms and expressions, as Israel's fullness, in verse 12, as the salvation of all Israel, in verse 26, as the banishing of ungodliness from Jacob, and the taking away of their sins. In this event, the mysterious purpose of God will be finally disclosed.

We can be forgiven for finding the claim that this has already been fulfilled somehow, both unconvincing and underwhelming. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 is an event of epochal significance in New Testament theology. It represents the decisive end to the old age with its covenantal order and the full establishment of the new covenant age.

The shadow of this event lies over the entirety of the New Testament. We should resist

notions of a dual covenant, the idea that Israel has its own track and the Gentiles have theirs. Even though Jews and Gentiles stand in differing relationship to it, there is only one olive tree and Gentiles now participate in the spiritual blessings of Israel.

This is a truth that we see in Romans 15, verse 27, and Ephesians 2, verses 11 to 22. AD 70 has ramifications for Israel's continuing identity, an identity which, even if it isn't simply alienated from them as some suppose, can only be fulfilled in their rejected Messiah. Nevertheless, this neither abolishes nor straightforwardly secularizes their peoplehood.

There is such an abundance of biblical prophecy and promise concerning Israel, in both the Old and New Testaments, that must be either ignored or spiritualized away in order to accomplish this. Besides all of this, the troubling questions of God's justice and narrative continuity that Paul wrestles with in Romans and elsewhere are greatly exacerbated by simplistically supersessionist positions. Promises whose relation to fulfillments can only be grasped in terms of highly involved hermeneutical systems and theological frameworks are appropriately viewed with suspicion, as are those who make them.

We should be wary of fulfillments divorced from any natural reading of the promises in question. When God claims, for instance, that the offspring of Israel will not cease from being a nation before him forever, in Jeremiah 31, verses 35-37, to interpret these words as a reference to the Church is greatly to strain both the text and the credulity of its readers and to raise unsettling concerns, if not about the truthfulness of God's promises, at least about their clarity. If God has already fulfilled the word of Romans 11, it seems as though, relative to what the text might have led us to believe, a dramatic, glorious and climactic revelation of the greatness of God's mercy and wisdom in the fullness of time, it was just a bit of a damp squib that went almost completely unrecognized.

Likewise, when Israel's national history is presumed to have reached its terminus in the destruction of Jerusalem or 1870, save to the degree that it was transposed into the story of the Church, much of the narrative energy and many of the driving concerns of the Old Testament must simply be abandoned after the advent of Christ. As Gentile Christians, as we see in Romans chapter 4, we are the children of Abraham, vitally connected to the story of Israel, as we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, sharers in their spiritual blessings, as we see in Romans 15-27, and one new Jew-Gentile people in Christ, in Ephesians 2, in which the Jew-Gentile opposition is no longer determinative of covenant membership. Such convictions against the distortions of movements such as dispensationalism can excite our crucial recognition that the Old Testament is a word that addresses us in Christ.

However, there are dangers lying in the other direction here, of spiritualizing the Old Testament away from the obstinate particularity of Christ's people according to the flesh.

In presuming that we already know how the story of Israel ends, we are in considerable danger of reading scripture inattentively, unalert to the many threads of the story of Israel, in Old and New Testaments, that are still loose, waiting to be tied up. One of the salutary effects of adopting a more careful reading of the New Testament's teaching concerning Israel, the New Covenant, the Church, and the future, a reading that doesn't presume that all the loose ends are sewn up in Christ's first advent, may be a greater attentiveness to the innumerable suggestive details and unresolved narrative threads in the scripture.

For instance, Luke gives us several details that anticipate a restoration of Israel that does not seem to have yet occurred. In the Olivet Discourse, for instance, Jesus prophesies the judgment of AD 70, but also indicates events beyond that. They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The similarity of the last clause of this statement with Romans 11, verse 25, should be noted. In Luke 22, verse 30, Jesus promises that the apostles will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel, again suggesting the probability of Israel having some role to play in the future. Even after the death and resurrection of Christ, the apostles want to know when the kingdom will be restored to Israel.

In Acts 1, verse 6, they present Jesus to the Jews as the Messiah appointed for them, who will fulfill the promise of the great prophet whom Israel will hear. In chapter 3, verses 19 to 26, the expectation of the restoration of Israel and the dramatic surprise of its non-occurrence is a crucial driving theme of the book of Acts. The book begins with the question of the time of the restoration of Israel and ends with the judgment of Isaiah chapter 6, verses 9 to 10.

In chapter 28 of Acts, verses 23 to 28, we might also note here that Acts begins with similar themes to 1 Kings, a departing David, the establishment of officers in the new regime, a gift of the spirit of wisdom, and the building of a temple, and it ends on a similar note as 2 Kings, with decisive judgment on Israel and a Jewish remnant in exile at the heart of the Gentile empire which crushes Jerusalem, with their former imprisonment somewhat relieved and kind treatment from the nations. How then should we think about Israel in the present situation? In discussing this subject, it is important to keep the distinctions and relations between Israel and the covenant in mind. In the old covenant, the covenant was more or less coterminous with the nation of Israel.

In the new covenant, the covenant includes many peoples. The new covenant is the fulfillment of promises made to the people of Israel under the old covenant, but includes many other peoples beyond them. The new covenant establishes a new international people who relate to God on an equal footing, but it doesn't merely dissolve people into an indiscriminate multitude.

Jews, Greeks, Romans, etc. remain. Jews, as the natural and firstborn seed of Abraham, now need to relate to Gentiles as full siblings in the family of Abraham.

They don't cease to be a distinct people, nor is that distinction a matter of unimportance though. The birth or adoption of many further children may mean that the firstborn no longer exclusively enjoys family membership, but he doesn't cease being the firstborn. Israel alone among the nations was born directly from divine blessing in the call of Abraham.

All the other nations were judged at Babel and have needed to be engrafted into blessing. While unbelieving Gentiles bore no relationship to the family of Abraham, unbelieving Jews are rebellious sons, alienated from blessings and covenant riches that should be their proper possession. The full inclusion of Israel is the eschatological hope of the restoration of a people.

In the Old Testament, the Lord makes special promises to Israel as his people, and he is the king of Israel. However, there is also the promise that the Lord's kingdom will one day extend over the whole earth and bring many other peoples under it. The kingdom should be then distinguished from the people.

Kingdoms can grow beyond their origins. For instance, the United Kingdom used to be three separate kingdoms. Wales was annexed to the Kingdom of England in the first half of the 1500s.

The Kingdom of Ireland, while distinct, was from Henry VIII in personal union with the English crown, as the same king was the king of both. Later in 1603, James VI of Scotland inherited the thrones of England and Ireland, becoming monarch of all three kingdoms and bringing them into personal union, even while the kingdoms remained formally distinct. In 1707, the Acts of Union formed a single kingdom of Scotland and England together, with the United Kingdom being formed with the addition of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1801.

While we may typically trace the history of the monarchy of the United Kingdom back through the England, other distinct peoples such as the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish now come under this monarchy. Let's say we had a situation where the English people were generally rejecting the monarchy and becoming republicans, while the United Kingdom prospered and expanded to include peoples who had once rejected it, such as say the French and the Americans. It would clearly be a tragedy, made more tragic by the fact that they were rejecting something that was clearly especially appropriate to England.

Paul is making a very similar point in Romans chapter 11. Christ Jesus, the Messiah, while the Lord of all nations and peoples, is a Jew and the King of the Jews. The Kingdom of God was once limited to Israel, but now spreads across the globe.

However, as long as Christ is rejected by his own people, there is a glaring missing piece, no matter how much the God prospers elsewhere. A question to consider, how is the great theme of grace that runs through the book of Romans developed more fully in the context of Israel's rejection and the Lord's response to it?