

Is the Establishment of the State of Israel a Fulfillment of the Old Testament Prophecy Concerning the Return of All Israel to Canaan?¹

By G. Wolff

This question can only be properly answered if we keep in mind the basic New Testament Truth, to wit, that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is the King and Savior who was promised to the Jews; that He gathers believers from Jews and Gentiles into an eternal kingdom, invisible here on this earth, yet nonetheless constantly being augmented from all nations; which kingdom shall be manifested in all its visible glory on Judgment Day and remain forever.

Christ is the king of Israel whose coming the Old Testament prophets foretold. This is what the angel Gabriel told the Virgin Mary, “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Lk 1:31–33). Here Gabriel was proclaiming the fulfillment of a prophecy which God once gave to David: “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom forever. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Sm 7:12, 13). This thought is expressed many times in Scripture, so also in Psalm 89: “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant, ‘I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations’” (vv. 3 and 4). The first disciples of the Lord also testify to the fulfillment of this prophecy. Andrew tells his brother Simon, “We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ).” And Nathanael said to Jesus: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel” (Jn 1:41, 45, 49). Before Pilate, Jesus himself testified that he himself was a king, and yet at the same time he states that he had not come to establish a secular kingdom by the force of arms: “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews.... You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me” (Jn 18:36, 37). Consequently Jesus did not come to reestablish David’s kingdom in even greater glory, nor did he instruct his disciples to establish a visible kingdom in Palestine. Quite the contrary; he corrected the erroneous views which they shared with their contemporaries and told them: “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and arise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Lk 24:46, 47). When the disciples asked him: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”—they were obsessed with the notion of a visible earthly reign!—Christ’s answer to their question was: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8). Hence the earthly Jerusalem is not the goal of his kingdom, but rather the starting point from which his spiritual kingdom of grace will spread as a result of Gospel preaching to all nations. Acts tells us of Paul’s missionary journeys. Whenever he came into a town that had a Jewish synagogue, he would first of all preach to the Jews there, witnessing to them that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah; yet he never urged them to return to Palestine, as if God had determined that Christ and his salvation were to have a special center there.

The law of Moses had been given to Israel to separate it as a people from all other nations, a holy people of God. The intention was to prepare this people for the fulfillment of the promises given to Abraham so that all other nations would know the promised Savior of the Jews and Gentiles would spring from this people, and his salvation would then spread into all the world. Many ceremonies prescribed in the law, eg., the sacrificial system, were types that in a prophetic way foreshadowed the salvation Christ was to procure for mankind. In any case, the law of Moses, as it was given to Israel, had only temporary validity until Christ would come to

¹ The writer is a retired pastor and the former director of the *Centre D’Etudes Theologiques* of the Evangelical Lutheran Free Church of France and Belgium. The article was translated by Dr. John Sullivan of Northwestern College.

fulfill and supersede it. At that point Israel's separate role among the nations, which was founded on the law of Moses and which included a rightful claim to the land of Canaan, ceased. Israel was not to constitute a separate religious and national community, but along with believing Gentiles constitute a spiritual kingdom under the rule of Christ and his Gospel.

The New Testament clearly and unmistakably attests that the law is only of temporary validity and that its significance is prophetic in nature, finding its fulfillment and end in Christ. "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). "So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law" (Ga 3:24, 25). "The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God" (He 7:18, 19). "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly, year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship" (He 10:1).

We shall mention a few important stipulations of the law that were fundamental for the Jewish nation and without which Israel of the Old Covenant could not at all have existed as a people of God, but which were no longer applicable in New Testament times. Among these is circumcision. Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law" (Ga 5:2, 3). Consequently if the Jews of our day select circumcision and a few other stipulations of the law to observe the same, this, then, is a transgression of the law, for if the law is still in force, then it must be observed in its entirety. "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you" (Dt 4:2). We call to mind the demand made at the Council of Jerusalem by Jewish Christians stemming from the Pharisaic party concerning converts from the Gentile world: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." Peter's answer to this was: "Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of his disciples a yoke that neither we or our fathers have been able to bear?" (Ac 15).

That the Sabbath commandment as well as all others concerning holy days were no longer binding is testified to by Paul in his wellknown passage: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Col 2:16). And in his letter to the Galatians he writes: "But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you" (Ga 4:9–11). Incidentally, it is also true that Sunday has not replaced the Jewish Sabbath by a divine command. The Augsburg Confession states that in Article 28: "*Denn die es dafuer achten, dass die Ordnung von Sonntag fuer den Sabbath als noetig aufgerichtet sei, die irren sehr, usw....*"

Above all, we must regard that as abrogated which constituted the very heart of Israel's worship, i.e., the system of sacrifices which was performed by a special hereditary priestly class of the tribe of Levi, and a succession of high priests from Aaron's family. These were at first offered up in the wilderness, then in the Tabernacle at Shiloh, and later on in the Temple which Solomon built. This was designated as the holy place where God deigned to dwell in the midst of his people and to accept sacrifices and prayers. Here the sins of the people were atoned for by the many sin offerings and thus the people were sanctified so that the holy God could dwell among a sinful people. It was only in this holy place that Israel was permitted to offer God its sacrifices: "Any Israelite or any alien living among them who offers a burnt offering or a sacrifice, and does not bring it to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting to sacrifice it to the Lord—that man must be cut off from his people" (Lv 17:8, 9). By means of this provision God intended to prevent pagan idol worship from penetrating, since the pagans, too, brought sacrifices to their idols. These sin offerings were brought for the most part in atonement for unintentional transgressions of the ceremonial law. There was no sin offering for willful and gross transgressions like murder or adultery; they were punishable with death. The Epistle to the Hebrews states: "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremoniously unclean

sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean” (9:13). “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (10:11). “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (10:4). The sacrifices endowed the people with merely an outward, bodily, symbolic purity, and were only a type of the genuine, true sacrifice of the eternal high priest, Christ, and of his perfect sin offering and the cleansing atonement it effected. Concerning Christ we read: “So Christ was sacrificed to take away the sins of many people, and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (He 9:28). (Incidentally, then, Christ is not coming again first to establish an earthly kingdom!) But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God ... because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (He 10:12, 14). If indeed the system of sacrifices is abolished, then the law given to the Jews pertaining to it, which was to effect an outward holiness and separation from the heathen, is also abolished, that law the transgressions of which necessitated the offering up of sin offerings. The Letter to the Hebrews adduces Jeremiah’s prophecy: “ ‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.’ ” In connection with this quotation we find this comment in the 13th verse: “By calling this covenant ‘new’ he has made the first one obsolete, and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (8:9–13).

That the whole Old Testament system of sacrifices is obsolete God demonstrated in history by the course of events. Israel’s genealogies are lost. No one knows who the descendants of the tribe of Levi and of the house of Aaron are, and only such would have the exclusive claim to the priesthood and the offering up of sacrifices. Hence the reestablishing of the system of sacrifices in keeping with the law of Moses is actually an impossibility.

If then the entire law of Moses (circumcision, the Sabbath, the system of sacrifices along with all its ceremonial stipulations), all of which marked the Jew, has been abolished, then the basic principles are gone on which the existence of Israel as a national and religious community, separate from other nations in terms of a divine command, had rested. Then Israel has no divine command to constitute itself as a separate religious community. Paul states this clearly in his Letter to the Ephesians when he reminds the Gentile Christians of their condition before their conversion: “Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:12–18).

Dr. G. Stoeckhardt offers an excellent explanation of this passage in his commentary on Ephesians: “The Mosaic law with all its institutions was a fence, an enclosure around Israel segregating it, encapsulating it, and thus preserving and protecting its uniqueness. The law was a partition, separating Israel and the non-Israelite Gentile nations. Christ tore down this wall of separation” (p. 144)... “By his suffering and death in the flesh Christ removed this law and along with it this dichotomy, the enmity between Gentile and Jew; first of all, in an objective sense by removing the basis and cause of this enmity.... The Christian Church is *de facto* the *one* man, consisting of Jew and Gentile, the new man in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek” (p. 146).

Now if the law is abolished because Christ has fulfilled it and atoned for all transgressions, if the wall of partition separating Jew and Gentile is removed, then there exists no divine command that the Jews form a separate national and religious community. Rather they, through faith in Christ, together with the Gentiles form one kingdom, one community, one holy Christian Church. Simultaneously the prophecy that the Jews shall have the land of Canaan as a heritage is null and void. For what purpose was the land promised to the patriarchs? Not only that their descendants might have a homeland, but because Christ, the Savior of Jew and Gentile, might be

born there, accomplish his work of salvation there, and there lay the foundation of his spiritual kingdom, from which center it was to spread throughout the world. All the world could then know from among which people and from which land salvation was to come to all nations. Jesus told the woman of Samaria: “Salvation is of the Jews.” And when she expressed her hope in the Messiah to come he said to her: “I who speak to you am he” (Jn 4:22, 26). Thus *has* salvation come from the Jews. The prophecies are fulfilled. What Isaiah foretold has come to pass: “The law will go out from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Is 2:3). The fulfillment was heralded when Jesus spoke to his disciples on the occasion of his ascension: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8).

Two kinds of promises were given to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. First of all, that all the nations of the earth were to be blessed through their seed, and second, that the land of Canaan was to be the dwelling place of their seed. Paul says with regard to these promises: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Ga 3:16). In other words, not the nation of Israel *per se* is to be a blessing to all nations, but a single descendant of Abraham, Christ, who offered himself up for all; and Israel is a blessing only to the extent that it propagates the message of Christ among the nations. The land of Canaan was not given to Israel *per se* (cf. Lv 25, 23): “The land is mine and you are but aliens and tenants”), but it was given to the seed of Abraham, Christ, so that he might be born there, accomplish his work of salvation there, and there establish his kingdom from which it was to spread throughout the whole world—something which actually did happen. The prophecies contained in chapters 12, 18, 22, 26, and 28 of Genesis are excellently summarized by John Gerhard: “*Ideo posteritati tuae dabo terrain Canaan, ut Messias, in quo et propter quem benedictio omnibus gentibus offeretur, certum nativitatis hospitium habeat et constet ex quo populo Messias sit expectandus*” (*Loci, Tom. IX p. 104b*). (“I shall give the land of Canaan to your descendants so that the Messiah, in whom and because of whom the blessing is offered to all nations, will have a birthplace and that men may know from among which people the Messiah is to come.”)

When in Genesis 13:15 the promise given to Abraham reads: “All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever,” the word *forever* cannot be taken in the literal sense of *eternity*, otherwise this present world would have to exist eternally. The Hebrew expression translated here *forever* means that the land of Canaan would be the possession of Abraham’s descendants forever, that is, as long as Israel existed as a nation, and furthermore upon condition that Israel would remain under the covenant which God had concluded with Abraham, which meant, as long as Israel would look for salvation from Abraham’s promised seed, from the Messiah, from Christ. In the event of unfaithfulness to the covenant promise Moses threatened Israel with expulsion from Canaan and its dispersion among the nations. For example, Deuteronomy 28:63, 64: “You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess. Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations from one end of the earth to the other.” Had the whole nation of Israel turned to Jesus Christ as a result of the preaching of the apostles and acknowledged him to be their king and Savior, then the catastrophe that befell Israel in the year 70 A.D., when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and led Israel into captivity and dispersed the people, would not have taken place. Just what the political developments in Israel would have been, had the Jews as a nation accepted Jesus as the Messiah, is fruitless speculation, since that event did not take place.

The promise of salvation given in Christ does not reach its culmination in the earthly Canaan, nor indeed in this present world, but rather on the new earth, from which all sin and death will be completely absent, and God will dwell in visible glory among his people, his blessed, transfigured, elect children. For this reason the earthly Canaan is in the final analysis both a guarantee and also a type of the heavenly Canaan, of eternal life in the glory of God and Christ. This was the hope of the patriarch who never gained possession of the earthly Canaan. The Letter to the Hebrews says of Abraham: “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country.... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect is God.” It is further stated concerning the patriarchs: “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for

a country of their own.... They were looking for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (He 11:9–16).

In another way the Letter to the Hebrews demonstrates that inhabiting the earthly Canaan was not the ultimate goal toward which God would lead His people. There is a reference to Psalm 95 in which David warns the Israel of his day that had already been in possession of Canaan for hundreds of years that they must not harden their hearts against God’s voice as their fathers, who had left Egypt, had done in the desert, and who because of their unbelief did not enter the land of Canaan. In Psalm 95 we read: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” From this Psalm the writer to the Hebrews concludes: “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day (to wit, in Psalm 95). There remains then a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (He 4:8, 9).

The final goal to which God would lead his people is then not an earthly rest in an earthly Canaan, but a rest in the eternal bliss of heaven concerning which we sing: “A rest remaineth for the weary.” Consequently, even if the whole people of Israel had gathered around its king and Savior, Jesus Christ, the law with all its appointments and with it also the promise of dwelling in the land of Canaan would have been superseded, for Christ’s kingdom is spiritual and extends not only over Canaan but over all nations. Psalm 72:8: “He will rule from sea to sea and from the River [Euphrates] to the ends of the earth.” The whole Jewish people would in that case together with all believing Gentiles have constituted a single world-wide community, one spiritual kingdom, one church, a true *oikoumene*.

However, the majority in Israel have ever resisted God, disregarded his promises, rebelled against his will, in short, become guilty of hardening their hearts. Moses prophesied the apostasy of this people before his death: “For I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt and to turn away from the way I have commanded you. In days to come disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and provoke him to anger by what your hands have made” (Dt 31:29). “For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the Lord while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die” (Dt 31:27). This constant, persistent resistance, this hardening of their hearts, finally brought the judgment of God upon Israel, God himself hardening their hearts so that they became non-receptive and insensitive to God’s promises of salvation and to his commandments, ending up in a state where they were incapable of conversion because God no longer wished to convert them.

God sent Isaiah, the greatest of the biblical prophets, who in a beautiful and picturesque language most gloriously prophesied to Israel of the salvation Christ acquired for mankind in the following charge: “Go and tell this people: ‘Be ever hearing, but never understanding, be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people callused; make their ears dull and close their eyes.’ Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (Is 6:9, 10). To these words he adds: “And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land” (6:13). This is henceforth the prophecy of Isaiah: Israel resembles a fallen tree with only its root stock remaining. The mass of Israel is of a hardened heart and lost, but in this corrupt mass there remains a holy seed, the remnant of the elect who will be converted and saved. These are the true Israel. Isaiah repeats this truth in chapter 10:22: “Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return. Destruction has been decreed, overwhelming and righteous.” Paul adduces this saying of the prophet in Romans 9:27: “Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: ‘Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved’ ” (*to hypoleimma sootheesetai*—Hebrew: *shear yashub*; the latter also being the name of the prophet’s son). Neither the hardening of the hearts of all Israel, nor a conversion of all Israel is prophesied here. Stoeckhardt is correct in saying: “There is no prophecy here stating that after all these terrible judgments Israel will finally be converted and saved, as many recent commentators suppose.” In such case the concept of “a hardening of hearts” would be removed. Indeed those whose hearts are hardened were previously threatened with a judgment of destruction. The comforting promise, however, is that in the midst of the *massa perdit*a, hopelessly subjected to hardening and destruction, there is left over a remnant, a holy seed, exempt from the judgment of hardening and destruction, surviving the condemnatory judgment to which the faithless, hardened nation succumbs. This

remnant lives forever. Thus then Isaiah's preaching, his prophetic word and testimony, do not prove entirely fruitless. Even though the mass proves obdurate and is lost, still some, the remnant, are converted, believing the promise of God, and thus saved. This is always the case. The preaching of the Gospel is never entirely fruitless. Even though the majority harden their hearts to it and their hardening finally proves permanent and results in their damnation, nonetheless there are always some who embrace the Gospel and are saved. The elect [who] are won over, come to faith, persevere in the faith and are saved. (*Commentary on Isaiah 1–12*, p. 74.)

The judgment resulting in the hardening of hearts had its beginning at the time of the Prophet Isaiah and reached its culmination in the days of Christ and the apostles. The evangelists and apostles cite Isaiah's words during the midst of Christ's activity. Thus in Matthew 13 when Jesus says to his disciples: "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing, but never understanding; you will be ever seeing, but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become callused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.'"

John also quotes these words concerning the judgment involving a hardening of hearts at the peak of Jesus' activity after the latter has raised Lazarus and entered Jerusalem as a king: "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfill the word of Isaiah the prophet: 'Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: 'He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn and I would heal them'" (Jn 12:37–40).

Finally the Apostle Paul once more quotes Isaiah's judgment concerning the hardening of hearts when he discourses with the Jews in Rome and concludes his remarks by saying: "Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen" (Ac 28:25).

The Apostle Paul also explains how Israel incurred the judgment of hardening, i.e., to the extent that this is comprehensible to our limited understanding, even where it is enlightened by the Holy Ghost: "What shall we then say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone.' [Is 28:16, 8:14] As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame' " (Ro 9:30–33). See also Peter 2:6–8. Paul continues: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Ro 10:3).

The corruption of the human heart is revealed most clearly in the case of the people of Israel. The corrupt human heart abuses the good and wholesome gifts of God, the result being that these very gifts prove to be its ruination. This is similar to what Paul says concerning the law: "Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful (Ro 7:13). The more grace shown to a person or a people, the greater misuse will it be subjected to, the more it will be despised, and hence the more terrible God's judgment of wrath where the like occurs. Israel abused God's law and promises in pride and self-exaltation. They imagined that possessing the law was tantamount to keeping it, and regarded this presumption as being the basis for their status as God's chosen people. This resulted in their transforming the prophecy of a Savior from sin into one of a temporal king who would make Israel a mighty, glorious secular kingdom dominating all the nations of the earth. Thus it happened that Israel lost salvation and the Gentiles shared it. Concerning the Gentiles Isaiah prophesies: "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me." Concerning Israel, however, he says: "All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations" (Is 65:1, 2; Ro 10:20, 21).

In view of this the apostle Paul raises the question: “I ask then, Did God reject his people?” (Ro 11:1). In view of the general animosity of Israel to the Gospel of Christ, and in view of the threatening punitive judgments on Israel uttered in the Old as well as in the New Testament, it might seem that all Israel has been rejected. However, this is not the case. Paul answers his own question by saying: “God did not reject his people whom he foreknew” (v. 2). Here Paul reveals an extremely important truth which is indispensable for understanding the history of Israel, to wit, that the term Israel can be used in a narrower and in a wider sense. In its broader sense it designates the people consisting of all the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In its narrower sense, however, it does not refer to all the physical descendants of Israel or Jacob, but only to faithful Israelites, to those whom God elected to faith and salvation and whom He actually converted. As an example Paul cites conditions that obtained in Elijah’s day. At that time it certainly seemed (and Elijah too was of this opinion) that the entire people of Israel, all the physical descendants of Abraham had forsaken God and were given to the worship of Baal, and that the prophet was the sole true worshiper of God left. But God told him at Mt. Horeb that such was not the case, and that he had preserved for himself 7,000 souls in Israel that had not bowed their knees to Baal, but had remained faithful to him. Then Paul applies this to his own day: “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (Ro 11:5). Here we again encounter the concept of “the remnant,” concerning which reference has already been made in Isaiah 10:22 and in Romans 9:27 (*to hypoleimma*). The elect remnant of the faithful constitute the true Israel, all of which surely is, and will be saved.

Thus Paul had already written in an earlier chapter (Ro 9:6–8): “It is not as though God’s word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham’s children. On the contrary, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.’ In other words, it is not the natural children who are God’s children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham’s offspring. The ‘children of promise,’ whom the apostle has in mind, enjoy a spiritual birth by virtue of the Gospel promise. They have been born again. God, using his word, brought them to faith, and as a result of that faith they were born again, regenerated” (Stoekhardt’s *Commentary on Romans*, p. 425). Galatians 4:28 says just that: “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”

Consequently where there is a question concerning the conversion of Israel, the reference is not to the conversion of all the physical descendants of Abraham, but rather the conversion of the elect remnant which is concealed among the mass of the hardened, but which constitutes the true Israel and shares the promised salvation: “What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.’ And David says: May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever” (Ro 11:7–10; Ps 69:23, 24).

However, still more must be said concerning Israel’s destiny. Paul now asks the question: “*Me eptaisan hina pesoosin?*” (Ro 11, 11) “Did they stumble that they should fall?” (Authorized Version). This resembles Luther’s: “*Sind sie darum angelaufen, dass sie fallen sollten?*” Stoekhardt: “*Sind sie doch nicht gestrauchelt, um zu fallen?*” Lenski construes *hina* in the consecutive sense: “Did they strike against [only with the result that they fell]?” This interpretation seems to us [the author] to be the correct one. Paul does not intend to say that after their fall they will rise again [an interpretation possible in terms of the NIV’s “Did they stumble as to fall beyond recovery?”—the translator]. Remember the Israelites referred to here are those who ran against the stone of offense, and consequently brought upon themselves a judgment involving a hardening of their hearts which leads to their ruin. Paul is rather saying: Does Israel’s taking umbrage at the rock of salvation have as its sole result their fall and destruction? No, this is not the case, rather because of their transgressions salvation has come to the Gentiles (Ro 11:11). Here God’s marvelous dispensation, overruling events, becomes evident in his unsearchable and incomprehensible judgments. Because of God’s dispensation the fall of the Jews has this blessed result that salvation has come to the Gentiles. This is what Paul and Barnabas said to the Jews at Antioch who rejected the Gospel and blasphemed: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles” (Ac 13:16).

However, this is not the complete answer to Paul's question. We must note the addition which really sheds the brightest light on the whole question: "Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them" (Ro 11:13, 14). The propagation of the Gospel of salvation in Christ among the Gentiles takes place with the intent that Jews may be attracted to the faith, Jews who are still far removed from salvation. In the early days of the New Testament it was Jews, converted to the faith, the apostles and their fellow-workers, who propagated the message of salvation among the Gentiles, even though the majority of their own people rejected that same Gospel and persecuted its Jewish adherents. Since then the situation has reversed itself: now Gentiles, believing, converted pagans, are leading Jews, the remnant in Israel, to Christ and into God's kingdom.

That such a conversion does not include all of Israel according to the flesh, all the physical descendants of Abraham, Paul says in the following words: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening *in part (pooroosis apo merous)* until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And *so* all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob' " (Ro 11:25).

These words of the apostle are wrongly interpreted by many as if he were saying that the judgment of hardening which has come upon Israel will only last until the full number of Gentiles will have entered the kingdom of God, and that then the punitive judgment of God over Israel will be removed and a conversion of all Israel according to the flesh, of all the physical descendants of Abraham, will take place. But this is just what the apostle is *not* saying. He does not say that the judgment will be lifted resulting in a conversion of the hardened, but rather that only a part of the people of Israel have come under this judgment, and that as long as the period of the Gentile conversion continues, and that as long as the Gospel is being preached among the Gentiles, Jews will still be converted, the remnant in Israel will be gathered in. Thus will be saved all Israel—and he did not have Israel according to the flesh in mind—but Israel according to the spirit, the children of promise, the elect who are hidden because of the mass of the hardened. If one presses the point that "all Israel" must include every last descendant of Abraham, the corollary would be, that all Jews who ever existed, even such as those who died in manifest unbelief (Saul, Judas, Caiphas and others) will be saved. By the same token "the full number of the Gentiles" cannot be taken to mean *all* Gentiles, rather only the full number of those who are predestined to eternal life. (Cf. Acts 13:48, "When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.") Holding a contrary view, one would end up with the heresy which is completely at odds with the Christian faith, universalism, the teaching that ultimately all men are saved. As has just been said, this contradicts the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments. The apostle does not say, *then*, i.e., when the full number of the Gentiles will have entered the kingdom, but rather, *thus*, in this way, to wit, since the hardening has taken place only in part and that during the time that the Gospel is being preached among the Gentiles, the remnant in Israel will also be gathered in. Then, when all the elect from among the Jews and the Gentiles are converted and have been brought into God's kingdom, then will Christ come again in glory, and the host of elect believers, gathered from among the Jews and the Gentiles, will enter eternal life with him in a new heaven and on a new earth concerning which Isaiah, Peter and John have prophesied, and which the Old Testament Canaan, Jerusalem, and Zion merely foreshadowed, of which they were but symbolical types. Paul testifies to this in Romans 11:12: "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!" And further in verse 15: "For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" Stoeckhardt writes: "When all the remnant of Israel, those whom God elected from before the foundation of the world, down to the very last one, have been won for Christ and have been graciously accepted by God, then the blessed glorious end will come. And this is certainly life from the dead.... When the preaching of the Gospel will have fulfilled its purpose among the Gentiles and the Jews, when the elect from among the Gentile nations as well as the elect among Israel are reconciled and have eternal communion with God, then this present world-age will be over, making way for a new state of existence and life, a life in glory; then the converted Gentiles and Jews will inherit the kingdom prepared for them from before the foundation of the world" (Stoeckhardt, p. 518).

How then are those prophetic promises to be construed which speak of Israel's return and ingathering in the land God had promised their fathers? One cannot adduce in this connection the specific prophecies of the return from Babylon at the time of King Cyrus as we find them in Isaiah 44:28 and 45:1, and likewise in Jeremiah 25:11: "And these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years." This return from Babylonian captivity involved only a small portion of the people, a portion of the tribe of Judah, and is described at the close of Chronicles and at the beginning of Ezra. There are, however, more far-reaching prophecies relating to a gathering of Israel from among all nations, involving also the Gentiles which is to take place in the land which God promised to the patriarchs. We shall cite a few of these. Jeremiah 23:5, 6: "The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will raise up to David a righteous branch, a King who will reign wisely and do what is just and right in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. This is the name by which he will be called: The Lord Our Righteousness." This same prophecy is repeated in Jeremiah 33:14ff We find a similar prophecy in Ezekiel 34:23: "I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd." Here we have a reference to the gathering of Israel under King David. This reference cannot be to the historical David, but rather to the promised Son of David, the Messiah, around whom the faithful in Israel will gather. The land in which this gathering is to take place is likewise not the earthly, spatial land of Canaan, but rather the land where Christ will rule over his people, and this reign is spiritual, extending over all the earth. Indeed the prophets often identify the kingdom of Christ in its present spiritual and invisible state with the kingdom of glory where God reigns in visible glory among his own. The apostles themselves vouch for this as being a proper exposition of the prophetic promise. At the apostolic council in Jerusalem the question is discussed whether the Gentiles converted to faith in Christ are to observe circumcision and the law of Moses. This is then denied and in the same connection the Apostle James cites a passage from Amos (9:11ff) where we read: " 'In that day I will restore David's fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins, and build it as it used to be, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name,' declares the Lord who will do these things." With regard to these verses Keil remarks in his commentary: "The restoration of David's fallen tent took its beginning with the appearance of Christ and the establishing of the Christian community by the apostles, and with the reception of the Gentiles into the kingdom of heaven, set up by Christ, the possession of Edom and all the other nations to whom the Lord had revealed his name began. The establishment and construction of this kingdom proceeds throughout the centuries that the Christian Church exists, and will reach its culmination when the full number of Gentiles [i.e., of the elect among the Gentiles] will have entered the kingdom of God, and the unbelieving Israel still existing in those times [i.e., the remnant of the elect in Israel] will have been converted to Christ. The land from which these streams of divine blessings will flow is not Palestine, but the confines of the Christian Church [i.e., the community of believers] on the earth to the extent that it participates in Christendom's blessings."

We find a further exposition of a Messianic prophecy in the Apostle Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2). Peter explains to those who witnessed the Pentecost miracle when the disciples proclaimed the wonderful deeds of God in foreign tongues: "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophecy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.' " "Prophecy," "visions," "dreams"—these are prophetic, figurative expressions for the knowledge of and proclamation of salvation in Christ, effected by the Holy Spirit, knowledge of things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man. The outpouring of the Spirit took its beginning on the first Pentecost and continues throughout the world wherever the Gospel is preached. This last action effecting man's salvation will be followed by the final judgment as Joel indicates in his concluding words, and then adds: "And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the Lord has said, among the survivors whom the Lord calls" (Jl 2:32). Keil comments: "Mt. Zion and Jerusalem cannot in this passage refer to the capital of the Kingdom of Judah, but are rather a symbol of their spiritual significance, being the place where the Lord is enthroned in his sanctuary among his people, that is, from the very center of God's kingdom. Nor is salvation

prophesied for the whole people of Israel—only for those calling upon the name of the Lord, i.e., the true worshippers of God upon whom the Spirit of God has been shed.”

From the New Testament, but already in some measure from the Old Testament, it is evident that the expressions: “the land promised to the fathers,” “the city of Jerusalem,” “Mt. Zion” in the prophecies referring to the times of the Messiah do not designate spatial, geographical places on this earth, but are rather figurative designations for the place where Christ in a spiritual way, as a King, holds sway in the hearts of his believers by virtue of the Gospel. John Gerhard writes: “*Prophetis in more positum, beneficia Messiae coelestia et spiritualia describere et adumbrare rebus corporalibus et mundanis, adeoque de rebus Novi Testamenti vaticinari verbis Veteris Testamenti, sicut etiam de cultu spirituali loquuntur verba ad legalem cultum pertinentibus*” (*Loci IX*, p. 106b). (“The prophets are in the habit of describing and depicting the heavenly and spiritual blessings of the Messiah in terms of physical and earthly things, using Old Testament terms for New Testament realities even as they, in speaking of worship in the Spirit, employ terms that were applicable to Old Testament worship under the law.”)

In his commentary on Ezekiel Keil writes: “The manner of describing the glorified and restored condition of Israel effected by the Messiah as a peaceful dwelling in the land of the fathers and life richly blessed with earthly goods is employed to a greater or lesser degree in the Messianic passages of all the prophets.... It follows from this that the prophets depicted the glorious restoration of Israel in figures borrowed both from the past as well as from the contemporary daily life in Israel, and hence these descriptions are not to be understood literally but typically, and that no literal fulfillment of the same is to be expected.”

At the same time the prophets often fused the state of Christ’s kingdom as a spiritual community on this earth, adorned with the gifts of the Spirit, even though still on this earth and under the domination of sin and death, fused it with its state in heavenly transfiguration and glory. When God says in Ezekiel: “My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd” (37:24), this manner of speaking can refer to the present state of Christ’s kingdom as well as to its state on the new earth concerning which John writes in Revelation: “Now the dwelling of God will be with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (21:3).

The land of Canaan which had been promised to Abraham and his descendants is the land in which Christ was born, carried out his work of salvation, and where he started his kingdom which has spread throughout all the world. Thus the expression “the land where your fathers lived” (Eze 32:25) became the symbol of Christ’s kingdom, which would spread into all the world. Paul alludes to this when he wrote: “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith” (Ro 4:13). In what respect is Abraham or his seed “the heir of the world”? His was the promise: “I have made you the father of many nations” (Ro 4:17). Here we have a reference not only to the physical descendants of Abraham, but to all believers, to all who have come to faith in Christ, Abraham’s promised seed, and thus are also children of Abraham. They are heirs of this present world, and of the world to come as Paul says: “All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God” (1 Cor 3:22, 23). Matthew 5:5: “Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.”

Thus, then, also “the city of Jerusalem” and “Mt. Zion” are expressions for the spiritual place where Christ reigns in human hearts through his Gospel, and hence lose their literal meaning as geographical terms. The Letter to the Hebrews writes to all spiritual Israelites (presumably in Rome): “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly” (12:22). Paul also speaks of Jerusalem in a double sense, when in Galatians 4:25 he compares Hagar, the slave woman, and Sarah, the free woman, and therein finds an allegorical representation of the differences between those who are under the law and those under grace: “Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.” Here Paul speaks of two different Jerusalems: “the present city of Jerusalem” refers to the Jewish people which rejected Christ, and finds itself in servitude under the law, and the “Jerusalem above” refers to the community of all who believe in Christ, who are born from

above (Jn 1:13: of God), and who are in communion with God and Christ. Concerning these Paul writes: “And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6). In such passages “Jerusalem” refers to the spiritual fellowship of believers or to the kingdom or church of Christ in its present state. In John there is reference to the heavenly Jerusalem in its future state on the new earth: “And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Re 21:2). Then John goes on to describe the glory of the new Jerusalem, however, in picture language referring to earthly objects in the way in which the prophets described Christ’s New Testament kingdom. This procedure is resorted to because there are no words in human language adequate to describing the glory to come that might represent it in a manner comprehensible to us.

Already Isaiah in his day had prophesied of the new Jerusalem in a future world: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy” (Is 65:17, 18). It is perfectly evident that the passage does not refer to an earthly, but to the heavenly Jerusalem.

As far as the earthly Jerusalem is concerned, in the New Testament it has completely lost its Old Testament significance as the “holy city,” the city where God dwells and where his sanctuary is. Even if the Jews had accepted Jesus as their Savior and king, the word which Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman would still hold true: “Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:21–23). This obviously means that such worship will not occur in terms of ceremonies ordained in the law of Moses, but in the grace and truth which have come through Jesus Christ. And certainly as far as Jerusalem and the Jewish people are concerned that rejected the message of Christ and his apostles, the words of judgment apply to them: “Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (Lk 21:24). Furthermore: “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Mt 23:38). Paul’s word applies: “Who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last” (*eis telos*: until the end, the fulfillment) (1 Th 2:15, 16). Already Isaiah in his day makes a distinction between the Israel that will be saved and those whose lot will be eternal destruction: “My servants will eat, but you will go hungry; my servants will drink, but you will go thirsty; my servants will rejoice, but you will be put to shame. My servants will sing out of the joy of their hearts, but you will cry out from anguish of heart and wail in brokenness of spirit” (Is 65:13, 14).

The answer to the question posed at the beginning of the paper is the following: In no case is the establishing of the State of Israel a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. God’s plan of salvation does not have as its goal the establishing of a visible, earthly capital. This would be a retrogression into the Old Testament, would mean imposing upon the free children of God the tutelage of the law (Ga 3:23, 25). No, as the King of Israel, Christ’s plan of salvation is rather this: “And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14).