“Salvation Is from the Jews”

by Richard John Neuhaus

Despite its suggestive power, the striking statement of Jesus that salvation is from the Jews is seldom encountered in the now voluminous literature on the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The reason may be that the exchange is entangled in another dispute about supersessionism between religious communities, a dispute entirely apart from the Jewish-Christian relationship. It will be remembered that the Samaritans—the shamerim, which means “observant”—claimed to be the true Israel who remained loyal to Yahweh when Eli allegedly seduced his brethren into constructing the apostate shrine at Shiloh instead of at God’s chosen mountain, Gerizim, as recounted in 1 Samuel 1. After the fourth-century schism, Jews forbade Samaritans to make offerings in Jerusalem, to buy unmovable property, and to marry or circumcise a Jew. As John the Evangelist writes, “For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.” In short, Jerusalem Judaism had definitively superseded the cult of Gerizim. Thus the exchange with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well may be something of an embarrassment in a Jewish-Christian dialogue that is centrally concerned with the question of supersessionism.

Or it may be that in the Jewish-Christian dialogue there is little reference to the statement that salvation is from the Jews because the dialogue is not centrally concerned with the question of salvation. In any event, our passage has not been treated kindly by Christian commentators. A recent ecumenical Christian commentary on the passage says that Jesus is acknowledging that “God’s salvation to humanity came historically through the Jews as a point of departure, not as origin or source. Salvation comes only from God.” “A point of departure”—it has a dismissive ring to it, almost as though Jews and Judaism are, for Christians, a dispensable accident of history.

Rudolf Bultmann, in a footnote in his commentary on John, gives our passage even shorter shrift. It is, he says, “completely or partially an editorial gloss,” since the statement that salvation is from the Jews is “impossible in John [who] does not regard the Jews as God’s chosen and saved people.” “It is hard to see,” he writes, “how the Johannine Jesus, who constantly disassociates himself from the Jews, could have made such a statement.” An interesting question that Bultmann does not address is why a later editor, presumably at a time when the lines between Jews and Christians had hardened, would have inserted such a statement. It seems improbable that an editor was trying to rectify what Bultmann views as the anti-Jewish bias of Jesus. It is more likely, I think, that Jesus said what he is said to have said, and that Bultmann’s view reflects his difficulty, and the difficulty of too many other Christians, in coming to terms with the Jewishness of Jesus, and of Christianity.

There is another reason for the neglect of this saying of Jesus. In some circles today, it is the accepted wisdom that the Fourth Gospel is impossibly anti-Judaic and even, it is
anachronistically said, anti-Semitic. John therefore should have no place in our reflections, and certainly not in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Thus do we with our putatively superior wisdom nullify the normativity of the sacred text. Nothing so powerfully testifies to the Jewishness of John’s Gospel as its vigorous, and sometimes disconcertingly aggressive, contention against opposing Messianic expectations held by other Jews.

In his 1955 commentary on John, the estimable C. K. Barrett offers what may be taken as a more conventional supersessionist understanding of these words of Jesus: “The saying does not mean that Jews as such are inevitably saved, but rather that the election of Israel to a true knowledge of God was in order that, at the time appointed by God, salvation might proceed from Israel to the world, and Israel’s own unique privilege be thereby dissolved. . . . This eschatological salvation is in the person of Jesus in process of realization and the Jews are losing their position to the Church.”

St. Augustine, as we might expect, treats the passage more imaginatively. Samaritans were “aliens” to the Jews, he notes, and so it is that the woman at the well is a type of the Church, which “was to come of the Gentiles, an alien from the race of the Jews.” Thus the Jewish supersession of the Samaritans is reversed by the Samaritan identification with the Church that supersedes the Jews. Of our passage Augustine says, “A great thing has he attributed to the Jews,” but then he immediately adds, “but do not understand him to mean those spurious Jews [who rejected the Christ].” Citing Ephesians 2, he says that Samaritans and Gentiles were strangers and foreigners to the covenants of God. When Jesus says, “We worship what we know,” he is speaking “in the person of the Jews, but not of all Jews, not of reprobate Jews, but of such as were the apostles, as were the prophets.” Citing Romans 11, he notes that “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew,” but by “His people” Augustine means only those Jews who are reconciled with the former aliens in Christ and his Church.

“Salvation is from the Jews.” Few thinkers have pondered that idea, if not that specific passage, more deeply than Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), who was, as it were, reconverted to Judaism after a very close brush with becoming a Christian. Rosenzweig’s view is frequently, if too simply, summarized in the proposition that Christianity is Judaism for the Gentiles. Moreover, Rosenzweig was centrally concerned with salvation, as is evident in the title of his major work, *The Star of Redemption*. This touches on a perduring, and perhaps necessary, ambivalence in Jewish attitudes toward Christians and Christianity. In the historic statement of November 2000, *Dabru Emet* (“Speak the Truth”), signed by almost two hundred notable Jewish scholars, it is said that “through Christianity hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel.” Then, toward the end of *Dabru Emet*, it is said: “We respect Christianity as a faith that originated within Judaism and that still has significant contacts with it. We do not see it as an extension of Judaism. Only if we cherish our own traditions can we pursue this relationship with integrity.”

Yet it would seem that, if through Christianity hundreds of
millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel, Christianity must be, in some important sense, an extension of Judaism. Moreover, Dabru Emet makes clear that this relationship is one of worshiping “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” underscoring that the God of Israel is not separable from the people of Israel. It follows that to be in relationship with the God of Israel is to be in relationship with the people of Israel. As is well known, in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, a favored phrase for the Church is the People of God. There is no plural for the people of God. Certainly there are distinct traditions that must be cherished and respected, but one may suggest that they are traditions within the one tradition, the one story, of salvation. That story is nothing less than, in Robert Jenson’s happy phrase, “the story of the world.”

Our distinct traditions reflect differences within the one tradition of witness to the God of Israel and his one plan of salvation. It is misleading, I believe, to speak of two peoples of God, or of two covenants, never mind to speak of two religions. While it was not specifically addressed to Jewish-Christian relations, this was the truth underscored also by the statement in 2000 by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Dominus Iesus. It is not Christian imperialism but fidelity to revealed truth that requires Christians to say that Christ is Lord of all or he is not Lord at all. From the Jewish side, when after the Council the Catholic Church was formalizing its conversations with non-Christians, the Jewish interlocutors insisted that they not be grouped with the Vatican dicastery designed to deal with other religions but be included in conjunction with the secretariat for promoting Christian unity. There were political reasons for that insistence, not least having to do with the politics of the Middle East, but that arrangement has, I believe, much more profound implications than were perhaps realized at the time.

The salvation that is from the Jews cannot be proclaimed or lived apart from the Jews. This is not to say that innumerable Christians, indeed the vast majority of Christians, have not and do not live their Christian faith without consciousness of or contact with Jews. Obviously, they have and they do. The percentage of Christians involved in any form of Jewish-Christian dialogue is minuscule. Not much larger, it may be noted, is the percentage of Jews involved. In addition, significant dialogue is, for the most part, a North American phenomenon. It is one of the many things to which the familiar phrase applies, “Only in America.” In Europe, for tragically obvious reasons, there are not enough Jews; in Israel, for reasons of growing tragedy, there are not enough Christians. Only in America are there enough Jews and Christians in a relationship of mutual security to make possible a dialogue that is unprecedented in two thousand years of history. The significance of this dialogue is in no way limited to America. The significance is universal. There is one people of Israel, as there is one Church. Providential purpose in history is a troubled subject, and the idea of America’s providential purpose is even more troubled, but I suggest that we would not be wrong to believe that this dialogue, so closely linked to the American experience, is an essential part of the unfolding of the story of the world.

Isaiah 43:19: “Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it
springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

I think it fair to say that neither Christians nor Jews would have seen this new thing or have acted upon it were it not for the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust. This is recognized in *Dabru Emet*, which says of the Christian understanding of Judaism, “In the decades since the Holocaust, Christianity has changed dramatically.” It should also be recognized that Judaism has, at least in large part, changed dramatically, as is evident in, for example, a statement such as *Dabru Emet*. Following World War II and accelerated by strident attacks on Christianity, and on Catholicism in particular, by such as Rolf Hochhuth and his 1963 play *The Deputy*, Jewish-Christian “dialogue” was for some years conducted mainly in the accusative mode. In this mode, the chief duty of Christians was to engage in rites of self-denigration for wrongs committed against Jews and Judaism. Some Jewish organizations and a good many self-deprecating Christians are still trapped in that mode. And it cannot be denied that, without the Jewish prosecution and subsequent Christian defensiveness, the self-examination resulting in the changes alluded to by *Dabru Emet* might not have happened. It is true that God writes straight with crooked lines.

Those Jews for whom “Never Again” means never enough of Christian self-denigration will continue to be with us, and we must try to contain our impatience, recognizing the burden of historical grievances and suspicions, and the institutional interest of some organizations in exploiting such grievances and suspicions. But in recent years the dialogue is becoming more truly a dialogue, as both Christians and Jews are at last catching up with, for instance, the proposal of David Novak in his important 1989 book, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. Indeed it may be said that, through the convoluted ways of history, we are at last catching up with the 1920s dialogue between Rosenzweig and Eugen Rosenstock, which was emphatically a dialogue about salvation—the salvation that comes from the Jews.

Still today there are Jews who resist a dialogue about salvation because that is necessarily a theological dialogue, and they do not want Christians to make Judaism a part of the Christian story. Similarly, there may be Christians who resent efforts such as *Dabru Emet* that tend to make Christianity part of the Jewish story. Advancing the dialogue requires, I believe, our recognition that the Christian story and the Jewish story are of theological interest only as they participate in the story of the one God of Israel. Along the way there are many stories, but ultimately the story of salvation, like the phrase “the people of God,” has no plural.

Today it is commonly said that Christianity needs to reappropriate its Jewish dimensions, including the Jewishness of Jesus, and that is undoubtedly part of the truth. But this should not be understood as a matter of taking some parts from the Jewish house next door in order to rehabilitate our Christian house. We live in the same house, of which Christians say with St. Paul that the Jewish Christ is the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). To change the metaphor somewhat, we live in the house of the one people of God only as we live with the Jews of whom Jesus was—and eternally is—one. The second Person of the Holy Trinity,
true God and true man, is Jewish flesh. As is the eucharistic body we receive, as is the Body of Christ into which we are incorporated by Baptism. It is said that when John XXIII, then papal nuncio in Paris, first saw the pictures of the Jewish corpses at Auschwitz, he exclaimed, “There is the Body of Christ!”

All such insights are but variations on the words of Paul that must, for Christians, be ever at the center of our reflection on the mystery of living Judaism: “But if some of the branches were broken off and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the richness of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. . . . So do not be proud, but stand in awe” (Romans 12:17ff). “Salvation is from the Jews.” This people is not, as the aforementioned Bible commentator suggests, a “point of departure” but remains until the end of time our point of arrival. By the appointment of the God whom we worship, we travel together, joined in awe of one another, sometimes in fear of one another, always in argument with one another, until that final point of arrival when we shall know even as we are known (1 Corinthians 13:12).

When we Christians do not walk together with Jews, we are in danger of regressing to the paganism from which we emerged. Rosenzweig saw that gnosticism, pantheism, and assimilation to the idolatry of culture and nation are constant temptations for Christians. In 1929 he was prescient in foreseeing what would happen in Germany:

The nations have been in a state of inner conflict ever since Christianity with its supernational power came upon them. Ever since then, and everywhere, a Siegfried is at strife with that stranger, the man of the cross (des gekreuzigten Mannes), in his very appearance so suspect a character. . . . This stranger who resists the continued attempts to assimilate him to that nation’s own self-idealization.

Marcionism was not a one-time heresy. New Marcions are ever at hand to seduce Christianity into becoming a culture-religion, a practical morality, or but another spirituality of self-fulfillment. Christianity does indeed seek to engage culture, provide a guide for living, and propose the way to human flourishing, but, reduced to any of these undoubtedly good ends, it is not Christianity. Liberal Protestant theology beginning in the nineteenth century was much preoccupied with the question of “the essence of Christianity,” and, not incidentally, was contemptuous of Jews and Judaism. Christianity is not defined by an essence but by the man of the cross, a permanently suspect character, forever a stranger of that strange people, the Jews. Through Jesus the Jew, we Christians are anchored in history, defined not by an abstract essence but by a most particular story.

With respect to Judaism, Christians today are exhorted to reject every form of supersessionism, and so we should. To supersede means to nullify, to void, to make obsolete, to displace. The end of supersessionism, however, cannot and must not mean the end of the argument between Christians and Jews. We cannot settle into the comfortable interreligious politesse of mutual respect for positions deemed to be equally true. Christ and his Church do not supersede Judaism but they do continue and fulfill the story
of which we are both part. Or so Christians must contend. It is the story that begins with Abraham who in the eucharistic canon we call “our father in faith.”

There is no avoiding the much vexed question of whether this means that Jews should enter into the further fulfillment of the salvation story by becoming Christians. Christians cannot, out of a desire to be polite, answer that question in the negative. We can and must say that the ultimate duty of each person is to form his conscience in truth and act upon that discernment; we can and must say that there are great goods to be sought in dialogue apart from conversion; we can and must say that we reject proselytizing, which is best defined as evangelizing in a way that deems the other; we can and must say that Jews and Christians need one another in many public tasks imposed upon us by a culture that is, in large part, in manifest rebellion against the God of Israel; we can and must say that there are theological, philosophical, and moral questions to be explored together, despite our differences regarding Messianic promise; we can and must say that friendship between Jew and Christian can be secured in shared love for the God of Israel; we can and must say that the historical forms we call Judaism and Christianity will be transcended, but not superseded, by the fulfillment of eschatological promise. But along the way to that final fulfillment we are locked in argument. It is an argument by which—for both Jew and Christian—conscience is formed, witness is honed, and friendship is deepened. This is our destiny, and this is our duty, as members of the one people of God—a people of God for which there is no plural.

We can do no better than Paul, who, at the end of his anguished ponderings in Romans nine through eleven, having arrived at the farthest reaches of analysis and explanation, dissolves into doxology:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! . . . For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen.

Along the way to the eschatological resolution of our disagreements, Jews and Christians encourage one another to wait faithfully upon the Lord. Not all Jews and not all Christians agree with this way of understanding the matter. For instance, Christopher Leighton writes, “Plurality and difference are the inescapable realities of our existence, and any theological attempt to dissolve our diversity through appeals to a higher truth or a totalizing unity are suspect, even when projected against an eschatological horizon.” He goes on to say that “the challenge for Christian theology is to accept, perhaps even celebrate, the gaps, the silences, the distances between us Christians and Jews.” That is in some respects an attractive view and should not be dismissed as being no more than interreligious politesse. But it is, I believe, finally inadequate. “Totalizing” is, of course, a pejorative term, but it is precisely a definitive and comprehensive eschatological resolution that we await. Leighton is surely right to say, however, that along the way we should engage the Jewish people “as a mystery in whose company we may discover our own limits and in whose midst we may also discern new and unsuspected insights into ourselves, the world, and God.”
It is precisely that spirit of discovery and discernment that marks the Second Vatican Council’s “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra Aetate*). Note that the declaration is about the Church, not simply about individual or group relations. Here the mystery of the Church encounters the mystery of the Jewish people. “As this sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the New Covenant with Abraham’s stock.” The Church does not go outside herself but more deeply within herself to engage Jews and Judaism. This is consonant with Rosenzweig’s observation that Christianity becomes something else when it is not centered in the Jewish “man of the cross.” *Nostra Aetate* continues: “Nor can [the Church] forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by his cross Christ, our Peace, reconciled Jew and Gentile, making them both one in himself (cf. Ephesians 2:14-16).” Note that the statement that the Church draws sustenance from the Jewish people is in the present tense. It is not simply that she drew sustenance in her beginnings; she now, and perhaps until the end of time, draws sustenance. Also with Muslims and others, *Nostra Aetate* enjoins understanding, respect, study, and dialogue, but only with reference to the Jews does the declaration say that we are dealing with the very mystery of the Church, and therefore the story of salvation.

At least for Catholics, *Nostra Aetate* marks the beginning of the present Jewish-Christian dialogue. That dialogue has produced many additional documents, official and unofficial, over the years. One may ask whether and, if so, how there have been advances over *Nostra Aetate* in Catholic understanding. That question necessarily engages the thought of John Paul II, who, it is universally acknowledged, has made unprecedented contributions to Catholic-Jewish relations. The extended reflection on Jews and Judaism in the Pope’s remarkable little book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* observes that “the New Covenant has its roots in the Old. The time when the people of the Old Covenant will be able to see themselves as part of the New is, naturally, a question to be left to the Holy Spirit.” A purpose of the dialogue, if not the purpose of the dialogue, he adds, is “not to put obstacles in the way” of Jews coming to that recognition.

Note that he speaks of when, not whether, this will happen. As though to leave no doubt on this point, he goes on to discuss “how the New Covenant serves to fulfill all that is rooted in the vocation of Abraham, in God’s covenant with Israel at Sinai, and in the whole rich heritage of the inspired Prophets who, hundreds of years before that fulfillment, pointed in the Sacred Scriptures to the One whom God would send in the ‘fullness of time’ (cf. Galatians 4:4).” Meanwhile, John Paul notes, the Church is carrying out the mission of Israel to the nations. He quotes approvingly a Jewish leader who said at a meeting, “I want to thank the Pope for all that the Catholic Church has done over the last two thousand years to make the true God known.” We may recall in this connection that the Council’s great Constitution on the Church, authoritatively setting forth her ecclesiological self-understanding, is titled *Lumen Gentium*, referring to the fulfillment of the vocation of
Israel to be a light to the nations.

A useful reference for understanding the state of authoritative Catholic teaching is, of course, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The Catechism has relatively little to say about Jews and Judaism in the post-biblical period, although, it must be admitted, the subject receives more attention than it probably does in the everyday piety, preaching, and catechesis of the Church. We read that “the people descended from Abraham would be the trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all His children into the unity of the Church” (#60). That hint of supersessionism is immediately tempered by reference to the branches being grafted onto the root of Israel. At another point the Jewish character of the early Church is underscored, citing the statement of James in Acts, “How many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed; and they are all zealous for the Law” (#595). The discussion of the Second Coming refers to Romans 11 and “the ‘full inclusion’ of the Jews in the Messiah’s salvation” (#674). The Catechism’s fullest statement is found under the title “The Church and non-Christians,” and deserves quotation in full:

And when one considers the future, God’s People of the Old Covenant and the new People of God tend towards similar goals: expectation of the coming (or the return) of the Messiah. But one awaits the return of the Messiah who died and rose from the dead and is recognized as Lord and Son of God; the other awaits the coming of a Messiah, whose features remain hidden till the end of time; and the latter waiting is accompanied by the drama of not knowing or of misunderstanding Christ Jesus. (#840)

While the Catechism is of course an authoritative presentation of magisterial teaching, one misses *Nostra Aetate*’s sense of the present-tense relationship to the Jewish people from which the Church learns and draws sustenance. Nor, in this connection, does the Catechism’s treatment of eschatological expectation suggest a promised understanding or resolution of differences beyond that which the Church already knows and embodies.

One may usefully contrast David Novak’s concluding thoughts on “the final redemption” in his book *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*:

Until that time, we are all travelers passing through a vale of tears until we appear before God in Zion. Jews and Christians begin at the same starting point, and both are convinced that we will meet at the all-mysterious end. Yet we cannot deny that our appointed tasks in this world are very different and must remain so because the covenant is not the same for both of us. It is God alone who will bring us to our unknown destination in a time pleasing to Him . . . . Our dialogue might be able to show the world that the hope it needs for its very survival can only be the hope for its final redemption . . . . From creation and revelation comes our faith that God has not and will not abandon us or the world, that the promised redemption is surely yet to come.

Christians believe that the redemption that is surely yet to come has appeared in the Redeemer, Jesus the Christ—although, to be sure, the appearance of the Kingdom, and therefore of the Messianic King in the fullness of glory, is
not yet complete. Christians speak of the first advent and the second advent of the Christ, but there is another sense in which we may speak of his advent in the singular. And, if we think of his advent in the singular, we are still awaiting the final act. In the End Time, however, the Messiah will not appear as a stranger. Along the way, we have known his name and named his name. Yet Novak’s sense of heightened expectation of something new-as distinct from the confirmation of a completely foregone and foreknown conclusion-seems to me the appropriate mode of eschatological hope also for Christians. Knowing that we do not yet know even as we are known, we know that there is more to be known. Dialogue between Jews and Christians should be marked by an element of curiosity, by shared exploration of what we do not know, and perhaps cannot know until the End Time.

For this reason, too, I believe our passage from John 4—“Salvation is from the Jews”—should have a more prominent place in the dialogue than has been the case. The passage nicely combines the “now” and “not yet” of life lived eschatologically. The “now” is unequivocal. The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming and when he comes he will show us all things.” Jesus answers, “I who speak to you am he.” The “now” and “not yet” are then exquisitely joined in the words of Jesus: “The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship Him.”

Here one can agree with Bultmann in recognizing in these words an intimation of the vision of Revelation 21:22-26: “And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never shut by day—and there shall be no night; they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations.” That is the mission of Israel fulfilled as lumen gentium.

Along the way to that fulfillment, Christians and Jews will disagree about whether we can name the name of the Lamb. And when it turns out that we Christians have rightly named the Lamb ahead of time, there will be, as St. Paul reminds us, no reason for boasting; for in the beginning, all along the way, and in the final consummation, it will be evident to all that the Lamb—which is to say salvation—is from the Jews. There will be no boasting for many reasons, not least because boasting is unseemly and there will be nothing unseemly in the Kingdom of God. But chiefly there will be no boasting because then all glory will be to the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus for His inclusion of us, all undeserving, in the story of salvation. Salvation is from the Jews, then, not as a “point of departure” but as the continuing presence and promise of a point of arrival—a point of arrival that we, Christians and Jews, together pray that we will together reach.

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Second, salvation is not "from" the Jews in the sense that they are somehow the source of it. The source of salvation is clear in scripture: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12). "For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ," (1 Thess 5:9). "For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men," (Titus 2:11). Actually, the Greek word translated "of" in John 4:22 is "ek" (ἐκ).

Conclusion. The phrase, "Salvation is from the Jews," however, should not be misconstrued. (a) Jews are not exempt from gospel responsibility as proclaimed by Christ (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 1:16; 11:26-27). (b) The Jewish historical relationship to the Messiah does not guarantee that all Jews will be saved. But did not Paul declare that "all Israel" would be saved? (Romans 11:26).

No, not in the sense of a massive conversion of the Jews. The phrase, "houtos—κοσμοῦτε sao ho utos (houtos—is an adverb of manner pertaining to what follows; Danker et al. 2000, 742) all Israel shall be saved (Romans 11:26a), reveals the me