

## ‘THE ROOT’ IN PAUL’S OLIVE TREE METAPHOR (ROMANS 11:16-24)

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### Summary

*In Romans 11:16-24 Paul addresses the subject of the Jewish and Gentile inclusion in the people of God using the illustration of the olive tree. How this description fits Paul’s argument in Romans or what precisely Paul communicates by this comparison remains unclear. This essay suggests that Paul’s awareness of living in the time when scripture is being fulfilled in Christ determines how we should read the olive tree metaphor. It proposes that the olive tree and the whole process of its rejuvenation pictures the restoration of Israel and the addition of the Gentiles into God’s people on the basis of the fulfilment of God’s promises in Christ, the very root of the tree. In this light the olive tree metaphor becomes lucid and fits Paul’s overall discussion in Romans.*

### 1. Introduction

Fundamental to Paul’s defence of God’s faithfulness is his contention in Romans 11:1-10 that God has not abandoned his historic people. God has saved a remnant according to the election of grace, and the present rejection of most of Israel, described as the branches broken off the cultivated olive tree, is not permanent (11:11-24). God has the power to graft his people back again (11:23). Finally, Paul asserts that all Israel will be saved (11:26). In the meantime, the Gentile believers should not feel themselves superior to unbelieving Jews. It is through the unbelief of Israel that the Gentiles (the ‘wild olive shoot’) are grafted in the tree.

Scholars struggle to provide a satisfactory explanation of Paul's olive tree metaphor because it is 'as cryptic as the mystery',<sup>1</sup> 'as puzzling as it is popular'.<sup>2</sup> Campbell argues that the metaphor is a part of 'a sustained engagement with the question of Jewish salvation in relation to Christ'.<sup>3</sup> Paul's pastoral concern is to discourage 'any pagan anti-Jewishness' that could be 'a latent possibility'.<sup>4</sup> This issue could be connected with the friction between the weak and the strong (ch. 14). If so, then Paul tries 'to ensure that his earlier arguments do not devolve into insensitive behaviour toward either Jews (so 11:17-32)<sup>5</sup> or Jewish Christians (so 14:1-15:13). Similarly, a sustained concern with unity is apparent, extending in particular through the letter's final quarter.'<sup>6</sup> Campbell is helpful in setting the metaphor in Paul's context of the letter; however he does not discuss it in detail.

Others have studied the olive tree imagery with particular emphasis on the broken branches,<sup>7</sup> on the question of who is 'all Israel',<sup>8</sup> on the jealousy motif,<sup>9</sup> on ethnic diversity,<sup>10</sup> in relation to the horticultural process,<sup>11</sup> and to the holiness of Israel.<sup>12</sup> It is variously viewed in the commentaries on Romans.<sup>13</sup> But the fundamental question still remains contentious: what does Paul mean by the root of the tree?

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<sup>1</sup> Jason A. Staples, 'What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with "All Israel"? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25-27', *JBL* 130 (2011): 317-90.

<sup>2</sup> Mark D. Nanos, "'Broken Branches": A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-24)' Online: <http://www.marknanos.com/BrokenBranches-8-1-08.pdf> [accessed 8 January 2008]. First presented at the International Symposium: *Romans 9-11 at the Interface Between the 'New Perspective on Paul' and Jewish-Christian Dialog*, Göttingen, Germany, 1-4 May 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009): 781.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 1131 n. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Scripture references are to Romans unless otherwise specified.

<sup>6</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 495.

<sup>7</sup> Nanos, 'Broken Branches'.

<sup>8</sup> Staples, 'What Do the Gentiles Have'.

<sup>9</sup> Richard H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans* (Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1994).

<sup>10</sup> Caroline Johnson Hodge, *If Sons, then Heirs: A Study of Kinship and Ethnicity in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 141-48.

<sup>11</sup> A. G. Baxter, J. A. Ziesler, 'Paul and Arboriculture: Romans 11.17-24', *JSNT* 24 (1985): 25-32.

<sup>12</sup> Maren Bohlen, *Sanctorum Communio: Die Christen als 'Heilige' bei Paulus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011): 199-205.

<sup>13</sup> More recently, it is viewed on rhetorical and argumentative grounds by Ben Witherington, III with Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004): 269-72; and Robert Jewett, *Romans:*

Paul refers to the root (ἡ ῥίζα) four times in the description of the tree. First, Paul writes in 11:16, 'if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy'. Then he asserts that the wild branches are grafted in and 'share the rich root of the olive tree' (11:17). The third time (using ἡ ῥίζα two times), he warns the Gentiles to remember 'that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you' (11:18). Clearly, the root plays a part in Paul's imagery. While the majority of scholars would agree that the broken branches represent unbelieving Jews, the wild shoots stand for the Gentiles, and the cultivated olive tree that in the Old Testament represents Israel (Jer. 11:16-17; Hos. 14:6) is most likely Israel in Paul's comparison too, there is no consensus on the question of what Paul means by the root of the tree.

## 2. History of Interpretation

Several explanations of the root in Paul's metaphor dominate recent scholarship.

In his recent theological commentary on Romans, K. Haacker argues that the root represents Israel giving rise to Christianity. Haacker understands the reference to dough in 11:16 in parallel with the root reference. For him the first fruits as well as the root refer to Israel. The dough and the branches belong to Christianity. He builds up this argument pointing to Jeremiah 2:3 where Israel is described as ἀρχή (origin) which is close to the first fruits (ἀπαρχή); and to Sulpicius Severus, a Christian writer of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries, where Israel is designated as the root of Christianity. If the root is Israel, then it is about the participation of the non-Jews (accordingly all people) in Israel's relationship that is expressed in the transference of what were originally Israel's features on the believers in Christ.<sup>14</sup> Jewett also insists that 'the principle of extended holiness provides the premise for Paul's enthymeme, which means that the basis for acknowledging the continued priority of Israel is that it provides the

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*Hermeneia - A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007): 668-93.

<sup>14</sup> Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 6; Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006): 259 (my paraphrase).

vehicle by which the holy, righteous community of the church came into the world'.<sup>15</sup>

A sizeable group of scholars believe the root to be the patriarchs, especially Abraham.<sup>16</sup> According to this view, in 11:17 the root 'will be used again to designate ancient Israel, onto which the Gentiles have been grafted'.<sup>17</sup> Some Jewish texts that describe Abraham as the root (*Jub.* 16:26; *1 En.* 93:8; Philo, *Quis rerum divinarum heres* 279)<sup>18</sup> or Isaac as the root (*Jub.* 21:24) give support to this view. The branches (natural and wild) share then in Abraham as the root, the ancestor of all. This suits Paul's discussion on Abraham in chapter 4. Moo suggests that the imagery in 11:17-18 is somewhat parallel to 11:28—God loves Israel for the sake of their ancestors (cf. 9:5).<sup>19</sup>

A third group explains the root as the converted remnant, the 'elect'.<sup>20</sup> This reading emerges from Paul's remnant explanation (11:1-7). The believing Jewish Christians serve to sanctify the unbelieving majority (as the believing spouses sanctify the unbelieving family members in 1 Cor. 7:14). If the root in Paul corresponds with the first fruits, there are other Pauline passages that refer to the believing Jews as ἀπαρχή (16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Thess. 2:13). In this view, the holiness of the Jewish Christians is the proof that God has not abandoned his people: so if the root is holy, the branches also are holy. This explanation supports the idea that the Christian Jews are the root of the not-yet-believing Israel and a guarantee of the holiness of the whole people, as Bohlen suggests.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 683.

<sup>16</sup> Some of them are: Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament 2; Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benziger Verlag und Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins GmbH, 1978): 246; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38b; Dallas: Word Books, 1988): 658; Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy*, 120; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 699-700; Baxter and Ziesler, 'Paul', 27-29.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993): 614.

<sup>18</sup> Philo (LCL): 4:427.

<sup>19</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 699.

<sup>20</sup> Bohlen, *Sanctorum Communio*, 204; Barrett, *Romans*, 216; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 614 (he supports this explanation and the previous one).

<sup>21</sup> Bohlen, *Sanctorum Communio*, 204.

A few scholars interpret Paul's two images in 11:16 separately, as complementary but not synonymous.<sup>22</sup> The complementary reading is evident in Jewish tradition; Paul may use the same technique here. Fitzmyer provides an example from *1 Enoch* 93:5, 'After that in the third week, at its end, a man will be chosen as the plant of upright judgment; after him will come the plant of uprightness forever' (usually understood to be Abraham and his offspring).<sup>23</sup> In this complementary reading the first fruits represent the remnant, those Jews who have already accepted Christ, while the root refers to the patriarchs, especially Abraham. This way, according to Fitzmyer, 'a link is established with both the preceding and the following context'.<sup>24</sup>

The final proposal for the root in Paul is Christ and, therefore, christological. Not many contemporary scholars adopt this explanation, dismissing it as 'hardly obvious'<sup>25</sup> or that 'such a reading introduces a totally new and unanticipated element into the discussion' since Paul does not particularly mention Christ here.<sup>26</sup> Other scholars take a middle way saying that the root primarily refers to Abraham or Israel and perhaps secondarily to Christ.<sup>27</sup> Yet, this view is supported by some early Fathers<sup>28</sup> and by Barth, Ellison, Hanson, and Wright.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly, the root can be taken to represent Israel, the patriarchs, or the converted remnant. Although Paul does not state explicitly that Christ is the root, a convincing case can be made for understanding the root as referring to Christ. To support this argument, this essay will first examine Paul's reference to the root and the branches in relation to

<sup>22</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 659; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975): 2:564; F. F. Bruce, *Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1963. Repr., 2008): 217; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 614.

<sup>23</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 614.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 614.

<sup>25</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 660.

<sup>26</sup> Dan G. Johnson, 'The Structure and Meaning of Romans 11', *CBQ* 46 (1984): 98.

<sup>27</sup> Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy*, 123; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam&Charles Black, 1962): 216.

<sup>28</sup> Origen (*In ep. Ad Romanos* 8.11); Gregory of Nissa (*Contra Eunomium* 3.2.54); Theodore of Mopsuestia in Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* 6. 2. 4., col. 857). He understands Christ as the first fruits but Abraham as the root. See Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (vol. 4 on the New Testament; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998): 293.

<sup>29</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1957): 285; H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel: An Exposition of Romans 9–11* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966): 86–87; Anthony T. Hanson, *Studies in Paul's Technique and Theology* (London: SPCK, 1974): 107–117; N. T. Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections' (*NIB* 10; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002): 684.

the first fruits and the whole batch in verse 16. Second, it will argue that the christological reading corresponds with Paul's language elsewhere and contributes to his immediate and overall message in Romans. Third, we will return to the different views on the root in Paul's olive tree image arguing that the christological explanation of the root is in fact a superior reading of the text in Romans 11.

### 3. The Root and the First Fruits in Verse 16

Paul begins a long discussion on the olive tree in 11:16 with a double conditional sentence placing the image of the root and the branches in parallel with the first fruits and the batch, 'If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.'

The image of the dough alludes to Numbers 15:20, 'From your first batch of dough (ἀπαρχὴν φυράματος) you shall present a loaf as a donation (ἀφάρεμα); you shall present it just as you present a donation from the threshing floor.' A donation (ἀφάρεμα/תְּרוּמָה) is an offering to the Lord (Num. 18:19, 24-29; Lev. 7:32; 8:27).<sup>30</sup> The idea behind it is that the small portion of dough becomes a burnt offering pleasing to God who blesses the whole batch of the dough and the participants in the sacrifice.<sup>31</sup> The same principle works for the first fruits of the harvest. They are given to God (Exod. 22:29). Although the idea of extended holiness from the part of the dough to the rest (or from the first fruits to the harvest) is not directly present here, it is implied. Leviticus 19:23-25 says that the fruits of the trees are regarded as 'uncircumcised' or 'impure/unclean' in LXX (ἀπερικάθατος) until the offering to God is made. In this light the first fruits as purifying the rest of the dough would be a natural implication.<sup>32</sup> Also, the holiness of the temple was frequently described as extending to Jerusalem and its hills (Neh. 11:1, 18; Isa. 11:9; 48:2; 66:20; Jer. 31:23, 40; Ezek. 20:40). So, Paul's logic would be recognised here.<sup>33</sup>

The concept of the part influencing the whole is not new in Paul. In 1 Corinthians 5:6 a little yeast leavens the whole dough but this

<sup>30</sup> NRSV translates תְּרוּמָה as a 'donation' which is a bit confusing because in other cases it is translated as 'offering'.

<sup>31</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 282.

<sup>32</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, 563-64.

<sup>33</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 658-59.

concept corresponds with God's people and who they are in Christ, 'Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed' (1 Cor. 5:7). Paul's imagery operates on two levels here. First, he addresses the fact that 'the sin of a single offender affects the whole church'.<sup>34</sup> Second, Paul emphasises 'the 'newness' of the new creation in Christ'.<sup>35</sup> He asks the Corinthians to clean (ἐκκαθάρατε) the old yeast and to become a new batch (God's people) on the basis of Christ's sacrificial death. The emphasis on Christ's sacrifice is the basis of their transfer from the old to the new and of maintaining cleanness. Although using different language, Paul describes Christ as a sacrifice for all (ἰλαστήριον) in 3:21-26 and as the very reason for the new identity of the people of God throughout Romans. So, the argument from the part to the whole is a common Pauline feature. Applying this idea to the tree imagery, one may add that Christ sanctifies the natural branches first but then also the wild branches; he brings a possibility of a new identity to them in himself and they derive a new identity from him and in him. He is the first fruit that is holy so the branches are holy through him and in him.

Moreover, Christ is explicitly described as ἡ ἀπαρχή two times in relation to death and resurrection (1 Cor. 15). He is the first fruits of those who have died (1 Cor. 15:20). He is the first fruits of the resurrection. Those who belong to him will be made alive (1 Cor. 15:22-23). In Romans Paul affirms that in Christ all those who die with him will be made alive (cf. 6:5-6). He believes that the Jewish acceptance of the Messiah (as in 10:6-13) will be life from the dead (11:15). In him many will be made righteous (5:12-21). This all corresponds well with what Paul says in verse 15 especially if 'life from the dead' is understood as referring to the resurrection of the dead<sup>36</sup> and in verse 16: Christ (ἡ ἀπαρχή) is holy, therefore τὸ φύραμα (all who belong to Christ) are holy.<sup>37</sup> The idea of grafting in

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<sup>34</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical & Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006): 86.

<sup>35</sup> Thiselton, *1 Corinthians*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy*, 119.

<sup>37</sup> The alternative reading would be to understand τὸ φύραμα as referring to Israel: if Jesus, the first Jew to rise from the dead, is holy, so then is the whole batch, i.e. Israel. See N. T. Wright, 'The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans' (D.Phil. dissertation, Oxford University, 1980): 186.

and supporting the Gentiles fits the idea of incorporation into Christ (11:17-18).

The language of ἡ ἀπαρχή as the origin or beginning (ἀρχή) can be clarified further by Paul's reference to Christ as the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) Son. Christ is the first fruits in a sense that he is the first one among many brothers and sisters (8:29), the beginning of God's renewed family (8:1-17). Israel is described as the firstborn son of God and holy in Exod. 4:22-23 and Jer. 31:9. Paul ascribes this title to Christ. Christ is the firstborn Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness (1:3). He is holy and so are those who are in Christ, Jews and Gentiles (1:7). He brings all the others into restored relationship with the holy God and Father. They are to conform to his image (8:29); become co-heirs with him in God's renewed family (8:17) and in him they are a holy and acceptable sacrifice (12:10). For Paul, Christ is the beginning, the root of God's people, that encompasses first the Jews but then also the Gentiles in himself.

The language of ἀρχή plays a significant role in Paul's high Christology of Colossians 1:15-20.<sup>38</sup> Christ is the beginning, the firstborn and the one before all things (Col. 1:15-20). Paul establishes the pre-eminence of Christ over the whole created order. He is the agent through whom the whole creation comes into being (cf. Gen. 1:1). He is described as the goal toward which the creation is shaped. He is the beginning of the new creation (Col. 1:18). The whole idea of reconciliation with God is grounded in him. This helps to understand verse 16 of Romans: if he is holy then all who are reconciled through him and are in him are holy.

Hanson provides support for the christological understanding of ἀπαρχή in relation to the entry into the promised land when the Israelites are commanded to present an offering to the Lord as they reach the promised land (Num. 15:17-21). If Paul bases his argument in allusion to Numbers 15 then for him, being in Christ is an anticipation of entering the promised land, 'an anticipation of the consummation at the parousia, when all the elect would be in full possession of God's promises'.<sup>39</sup> Paul's discussion in Romans 11 on Israel's salvation and on the engrafting of the Gentiles is written in the present and the future terms. Perhaps Paul sees the offering of Christ as ἀπαρχή for all God's

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<sup>38</sup> Paul's authorship of Colossians is contested but few would deny that Colossians is Pauline in some sense.

<sup>39</sup> Hanson, *Studies in Paul*, 109.

elect now and in the future when renewed Israel reaches the promised land (11:26).

#### 4. Christ as the Root

Paul's keen awareness of living in the time when the Old Testament pronouncements are being fulfilled in Christ determines his usage of the olive tree metaphor. The proposal, that he uses the olive tree and the whole process of its rejuvenation to draw a picture of the restoration of Israel and the addition of the Gentiles into God's people on the basis of God's fulfilment of his promises in Christ, coheres with Paul's overarching theological convictions. On this reading, Christ is the very root of the tree. The evidence for this view is substantial.

First, elsewhere in Romans Paul understands Jesus explicitly as ἡ ρίζα. In 15:12 Paul refers to Christ as the root of Jesse, 'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' This phrase alludes to Isaiah 11:10, 'On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.' Within the broader context (Isa. 9–12) Isaiah talks about the return of a remnant of both Israel and Judah, and God's purpose to renew the whole created order. Isaiah announces the coming of God's agent, the descendant of the Davidic line, the stump of Jesse who will gather the scattered people of Judah and Israel. God's name will be exalted among the nations. When Paul refers to the scripture he not only emphasises that this agent will rule over nations but also that the Gentiles will have hope in him. Paul uses Isaiah to confirm the fulfilment of God's promises in relation to Israel and the realisation of Old Testament prophecy. He asserts that Christ is a Davidic descendant (1:3) and, therefore, he is the promised Jewish Messiah. But he also enables the Gentiles to glorify and hope in God (15:8-12). Although Paul does not specify the root in 11:16-18 his direct reference to the root as Christ elsewhere could imply that he understands it christologically in this passage as well.

In 11:26-27 Paul speaks about the deliverer who will come from Zion quoting Isaiah again (Isa. 59:20-21). It is commonly agreed that the eschatological deliverer in Paul's context is Christ. Wagner believes that in Romans 9–11 and 15 Paul uses Isaiah as fore-witness

that ‘in Christ, God has now acted to redeem Jew and Gentile alike’.<sup>40</sup> Paul refers to the scripture to show that the transformation of the people of God is the result of God’s work in Christ in relation to the Jews and to the Gentiles. Paul declares that Jesus Christ is promised beforehand (1:2). He comes from the patriarchs but is over all (9:5). He is, in Wright’s words, ‘the crowning privilege of Israel, the human and historical focus of the nation’s long story as God’s people’.<sup>41</sup>

According to Paul, the whole story of God’s dealing with Israel presupposes Christ and it has been realised in Christ. In 1 Corinthians Paul is able to say that the rock that followed Israel under Moses was Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-4). Paul reads Israel’s entire story in the light of Christ because in his view the action of God has always been centred in Christ. It is quite possible that here he says something similar: the pre-existent Christ was present in Israel’s history; he is their root. He has always been a part of God’s work in Israel and through Israel for other nations.

Israel’s stumbling also supports a christological explanation of the passage further. Paul claims earlier that God’s people Israel stumbled over the stumbling stone, Jesus the Messiah. The Gentiles instead have obtained righteousness by faith (9:32-33), that is, of Christ Jesus. However, Paul explains the idea of the Gentiles’ salvation with an interesting twist in relation to Israel. Salvation has come to the Gentiles because of Israel’s transgression, diminution (11:11-12), and their disobedience (11:30). It appears that Israel’s stumble is ‘actually part of the *means by which* “Gentiles” coming into faith happened’.<sup>42</sup> Paul does not say here that it is only because the Jews stumble that salvation has come to the Gentiles. Rather, Paul re-emphasises his earlier claim that Jewish unfaithfulness does not nullify God’s faithfulness (3:3ff.). This is a part of God’s plan revealed in Christ (3:21-25).

Therefore, both Barth and Cranfield pick up Paul’s language here to argue that Israel’s failure is logically linked with the reference to the rejection of their Messiah, his death and eventual reconciliation of the world.<sup>43</sup> More recently, Wright describes their hardening as ‘the necessary context for the Messiah’s death, and as such [it] has become part of the saving plan’. In this sense Jewish disobedience and

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<sup>40</sup> Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 340.

<sup>41</sup> Wright, ‘The Letter to the Romans’, 684.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, ‘The Letter to the Romans’, 680.

<sup>43</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 278-79. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:564-65.

hardening provide 'breathing space' for the Gentiles to come in.<sup>44</sup> In Christ God provides the means by which his covenantal promises to Abraham (4:17; cf. Gen. 17:5) have been fulfilled. Through him Israel has become the channel for the Gentiles to come in and to join God's people, the cultivated olive tree. Although Paul does not mention Christ in these verses, it is inherently likely that Paul is thinking christologically throughout the whole argument.

Second, for Paul the resurrected and exalted Christ is the focal point for Gentile and Jewish salvation; the focus of God's revelation. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, the Son of David and the Son of God (1:1-5) who comes to save the Jews first but then also the Gentiles (1:16; 3:22). Paul refers to Christ through whom both Jews and Gentiles will be saved (1:1-7; 3:21-25; 5:1-21). Paul does not envision any other way of salvation for either Jews or Gentiles apart from Christ Jesus. God's way of reconciliation for Paul is through Christ for the whole of humanity (1:1-5; 3:21-26; 5:1-21; 8:1-32). Paul establishes the idea of sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles before God (1:18-3:20) and explains God's solution of this plight in Christ (3:21-26; 5:1-21). For Paul it is important to display that Christ comes as the fulfilment of God's promises to the Jews given in the scripture (1:2; 3:21; 10:4; 15:8) so that the Gentiles also may glorify God (15:8) and be called into obedience of faith through him (1:5). Those who are led by the Spirit are God's children and heirs, co-heirs with Christ (8:14-17). This family is no replacement of Judaism or Jewish ethnicity but invariably it is 'a melding of new and old'<sup>45</sup> because of God's act in Christ. The christological understanding of the olive tree metaphor brings Paul's overall christological emphasis in the letter into the foreground.

Romans 11:20-23 gives further support of a christological reading of the inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in his metaphor. Israel is broken off because of unbelief. The Gentiles who are responding to Christ are grafted in the tree. Moreover, if Israel does not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted back into the tree by God. Belief in God and his faithfulness to the promises is essential. It is Abraham's faith in God's faithfulness which was reckoned to him as righteousness. But since the coming of God's Son, it is not only faith in a God who has promised to act but faith in the God who has already acted in Jesus and has raised

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<sup>44</sup> Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans', 680, 683.

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 1032 n.107.

him from the dead (4:23-25; 5:1-25; 10:9). This is faith in the faithfulness and obedience of Christ Jesus, God's Son, the true Jewish Messiah and the Saviour of the world (1:1-5, 16-17; 3:21-26; 5:1-21). This faith rests in Christ who is the fulfilment of the law and the promises (1:1-5, 16; 3:22b; 10:4, 9-13). It is participation in Christ's faithfulness (chs. 5-8). Thus, being grafted into the olive tree and living in it, or being grafted back into the tree is all through Christ, the root of the tree.

Having considered a christological explanation of the olive tree as valid in overall context let us turn to what Paul means in 11:17-18 if the root represents Christ. The main concern in these verses is the relationship between the branches. Some of the branches are broken off (presumably those who rejected Christ). Some, by implication, remain attached to the tree (the Jewish converts like Paul himself). There are also the wild olive branches (the Gentile Christians) who are grafted in the tree among the remaining branches, literally 'among them' (ἐν αὐτοῖς). Paul warns the Gentile Christians not to boast against the other branches. Whether Paul includes in this category only broken off branches or all natural ones is not certain. The immediate context suggests the former. However, if there is any anti-Jewish attitude from the new Gentile converts that Paul knows or anticipates, then Paul reminds them that their own position in the natural tree is a privilege that cannot be boasted about (cf. 11:25). Paul reminds them that they became sharers in the rich root and that the root supports them.

The idea of being sharers in verse 17 (συγκοινωνός) is consistent with Paul's fundamental emphasis on sharing with Christ, 'God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship (κοινωνία) of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor. 1:9; cf. 6:4; 1 Cor. 10:16; Phil. 3:10). It involves mutuality and equality in terms of nurturing from the same source.

Paul's reference to the rich root (τῆς ῥίζης τῆς πλοῦτητος) is more challenging to explain. The genitive, 'of the fatness or richness', may be appositional, 'the root of the olive with its fatness', or simply descriptive, 'the rich root of the olive tree'. Since the main emphasis in the verse is on the root, it is more plausible that 'the fatness or richness' is descriptive of the root.<sup>46</sup> The rich root is bigger than just Abraham, patriarchs or the Jewish Christians. It is rather something

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<sup>46</sup> Contra Cranfield, *Romans*, 567.

that sustains them and gives life to the unnatural branches as well. It symbolises life, blessedness, religious heritage and promises all together expressed in Christ because 'it is only in him, as his prophets, witnesses, forerunners, that others are as well, those who are specially elected in him, with him, and for his sake'.<sup>47</sup> The explanation of Christ's being the seed in Galatians 3 makes abundantly clear how this works. All Israelites are 'the ancestors or at least the kinsmen of this seed who is the meaning and goal of the whole'.<sup>48</sup> To borrow Barth's language further, the whole history of Israel brings forth 'a single annunciation of Jesus'. He is the last and the first Israelite, the seed, and, therefore, the root 'from which they have all come and grown'.<sup>49</sup> When in 11:18 Paul warns the Gentiles not to boast over the branches that are broken off and reminds them that the root supports them he says that they cannot claim their possession of Christ for them alone. Christ is the promised Davidic Messiah (1:2-3), and the Gentiles should not be contemptuous of the Jews who do not yet understand that Jesus is the Messiah.

It is more natural to presume that for Paul Christ, rather than the patriarchs or Israel, is the rich root that gives life to both Jews and Gentile Christians. Thus, all those who are grafted into the olive tree, are grafted into Christ himself. Different branches are incorporated into Christ becoming one people and sharing the same ancestral identity.

N. T. Wright argues that if the tree illustrates the people of God, 'the people stretching back to Abraham and now including both Gentiles and Jews ... The Messiah (most probably) is the "root" through whom the tree now gets its life (v. 17), the one who holds the whole thing in place, enabling Gentile members to gain life (v. 18)'.<sup>50</sup> If the olive tree serves Paul to explain once again the complicated process of the Jews and the Gentiles coming together then Christ is undoubtedly the very reason for the whole rejuvenation process and as such he is most likely the root of the tree in Paul's metaphor.

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<sup>47</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 214.

<sup>48</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 285.

<sup>49</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 285.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, 'The Letter to the Romans', 684-85.

## 5. Christological Explanation of the Root in the Light of Other Views

As noted earlier, several explanations of the root in Paul's metaphor are plausible. But to what extent do they adequately cohere within Paul's theological reflection on the significance of Christ?

Haacker's explanation of the root's representing Israel supports Paul's general thread that 'Israel is still the possession and work of God, and as such the presupposition without which there would be no Church, and no Gentile Christians.'<sup>51</sup> This explanation, however, does not fit Paul's previous comment on Israel's stumbling (11:11-15). A move from the 'stumbling' of Israel to its holiness as that which sanctifies those who now accept Christ (especially 'their [Israel's] acceptance') is still awaited in 11:15. In the overall context (11:11-25) Paul is concerned not about the relationship between Israel and Christianity but about the present and the future status of Israel in terms of salvation. The linguistic parallels to Jeremiah 2:3 (where Israel is described as ὄρχή and not as ἄπορχή) and to Sulpicius Severus of the Fourth to Fifth Centuries (where Israel is designated as the root of Christianity) are not strong supportive arguments for understanding the root in Paul.

While the explanation of the root's representing the patriarchs sounds convincing, questions can be raised. Clearly, Paul emphasises the point that the people of Israel are beloved for the sake of their ancestors (11:28) but nothing in particular suggests that he speaks here about the patriarchs in relation to Israel or to the Gentiles for that matter (as in ch. 4). Neither does Paul describe Abraham or the forefathers directly as a root in his letters. In the preceding context he talks about the remnant (11:1-11) and Israel's stumbling (11:12-15). Barth notices, 'In relation to this root the patriarchs no less than the latter seven thousand are obviously branches like other branches, although branches which, unlike others, are not cut off but remain in the pruned stem which grows out of this root.'<sup>52</sup> In the following verses Paul compares the members of Israel as well as the Gentiles with the branches of the olive tree (11:17-24). Accordingly, they all belong to the tree and the root. This suggests that the root is something other than Israel or Israel's ancestors—something that points to the origin of

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<sup>51</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 285.

<sup>52</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2*, 285.

Israel (from which Israel grows as a tree). Even those who argue that the root represents the patriarchs or Abraham understand that the patriarchs did not earn spiritual benefits for themselves and their descendants. They are recipients and transmitters of the promises of God. The source of patriarchal holiness is God. Human holiness is always dependent. Throughout Romans Paul emphasises that to belong to Christ is to belong to God. Rather Christ is the source and the root that is holy (11:16) which supports a christological explanation of the metaphor.

Again, the explanation of the root's being the converted remnant has merit, especially in terms of holiness by association in the light of 1 Corinthians 7:14. The strong argument in favour of this view is also the fact that Paul uses ἀπαρχή in Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:15 and in 2 Thessalonians 2:13 to describe the first converts among the Jews. Yet, it does not really clarify the overall picture in Romans 11. If the root is the Christian Jews and they are also the attached natural branches, the image is confusing. The Jewish Christians may correspond more with the first fruits, but there is no other evidence that ἡ ρίζα is used to describe them (11:16). It is also doubtful that Paul intends to make the division in verse 16. The parallel construction of the phrase tells against this suggestion, εἰ δὲ ἡ ἀπαρχὴ ἁγία, καὶ τὸ φύραμα· καὶ εἰ ἡ ρίζα ἁγία, καὶ οἱ κλάδοι. The metaphors express parallel ideas, moving from the part to the whole (from the first fruits to the whole dough; from the root to the branches). They rather appear to be synonymous than complementary: the first fruits and the root clarify the same phenomenon. Christ's being the first fruits and the root fits both descriptions. Belonging to Christ corresponds with the extension to the whole emphasised in both comparisons. Furthermore, the idea of Christ described as ἀπαρχή is by no means, as Hanson suggests, inconsistent with the use of the word by Paul in relation to the Jewish converts elsewhere, 'as long as we keep firmly before us the vital link which the theology of ἐν Χριστῷ gives between the ἀπαρχὴ and the φύραμα'.<sup>53</sup>

On the surface of Paul's argument is the question about Jewish rejection/salvation. Did God reject his historic people (11:1)? Drawing the picture of the olive tree that in the Scripture represents Israel (Jer. 11:16-17; Hos. 14:6) and including the idea of engrafting, Paul says at

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<sup>53</sup> Hanson, *Studies in Paul*, 110.

least three important things about the Jews and their interrelationship with the Gentiles. First, there are Jews who are as natural branches still attached to the tree, those who have already accepted Christ. Second, God is able to graft broken off branches back on. God has not abandoned them. There is always a hope of coming back if they do not stay in their unbelief. Third, Jewish rejection is beneficial for the Gentiles, the wild branches that are grafted in the tree. This way Paul extends the notion of Israel as an olive tree by including the Gentiles in it. Although the Gentiles are wild branches they are grafted in together with the natural branches and nurtured from the same root. However, the Gentile Christians should not boast about their new position in the tree. They must stay in faith and remember that the root supports them. The image of the olive tree serves Paul to illuminate the faithfulness of God to Israel and the Gentiles' joining Israel as the people of God as a result of God's saving act in Christ.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper argues that although Paul does not mention Christ here, his argument has a christological focus throughout. Christ is the very root of the olive tree that holds the whole tree encompassing God's historic people and the Gentiles. Obtaining salvation and staying in the tree or being grafted back into the tree is all through Christ.

Although there are many propositions to the understanding of the root in Paul's olive tree metaphor, the christological explanation makes better sense in the light of Paul's overall emphasis on God's salvation in Christ. In addition, in Paul's context Christ is explicitly referred to as the root of Jesse. Paul uses Isaianic language to emphasise God's work of salvation in Christ in relation to both Jews and Gentiles. The idea of sharing (συγκοινωνός) in the richness of the olive tree (11:17) is also consistent with Paul's fundamental emphasis on sharing with Christ. Israel's stumbling is another argument for Paul's christological thinking. Israel's stumbling and hardening provides the context for Jesus Christ's death and grafting in of the Gentiles. The image of the offered first fruits leading to the holiness of the whole batch of the dough further supports the christological explanation of the root. Paul refers to Christ as the first fruits in terms of resurrection which other believers will follow. Christ gives life like the root of the tree. Paul also

describes him as the firstborn Son among other members in the family of God. Other members derive their identity from him. In him all the branches are holy because he is holy. This is part of God's overall plan for both Jews and Gentiles in Christ.