

# SMOKE IN THE EYES

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## INTRODUCTION:

There are two dangers when it comes to the interpretation of biblical prophecy. The first, fairly common among evangelicals, is to picture the fulfillment in lurid and garish colors, filled out with a crass literalism, but which fully retains the right to be called “fantastical.” Such fulfillments, were they to happen, would be amazing. But the second error is to learn about the first error, and then to retreat into an acceptance of the kind of biblical fulfillments that could conceivably escape the notice of virtually every historian. These things were “spiritually” fulfilled, you see, and you can’t expect them to alter the flow of history in any visible way. But this is not how the Bible teaches us to think. We are not to give way to a wooden literalism when it comes to prophecy, but neither are we to dilute it all into a homeopathic nothingness. Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Cor. 2:9). Eye has not seen it now, but all eyes will see it then.

## THE TEXT:

“Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing?? of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness? For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them. For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead? For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches” (Rom. 11:12-16).

## SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Paul’s argument is that if the apostasy of most of the Jews was such a blessing to the Gentiles, how much more of a blessing (to the Gentiles) will their fullness be (v. 12)? Paul is speaking to the Gentiles there at the church in Rome, and he makes a big deal out of the fact that he had been designated to be an apostle to the Gentiles (v. 13; Gal. 2:8; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). The reason he does this is that he wants to provoke his brothers the Jews, and to provoke them into salvation (v. 14). And as it bends around again, this provocation of the Jews will be a blessing for the whole world (to whom Paul was sent), resulting in “life from the dead” (v. 15). Paul then argues that if the first fruits were holy, then the lump would also be holy. If the root were holy, then the branches would be also (v. 16).

## LEARNING HOW GOD PLOTS STORIES:

This is how God works. When something negative happens, like the apostasy of the majority of first century Judaism, this is because God is working on a great blessing for the world. And we need to note that this apostasy was not just an unfortunate series of events, or a sad time. It was a disaster for the Jewish people, a cataclysm in which over a million people lost their lives. Jesus spoke of it as the very worst moment in the history of the world (Matt. 24:21). This was to be understood, in the words of Paul here, as the “reconciling of the world.” Just as the death of Jesus, another great disaster, was our salvation, so the destruction of the Jewish nation was designed to open the door for everyone else.

We think we get this, and we would reason that if that is true, then when blessing returns to the Jewish people, then that will mean that we have to see-saw back to a time when the Gentiles are excluded and cursed. Not at all, Paul says. If the Jewish fall was a great blessing for us, how much more will their restoration be an even great blessing for us.

### THE JEWISH NATION:

Just as the apostasy did not include the remnant (the one that Isaiah had prophesied, and that Paul discussed a little earlier in Romans), so also it does not include the many Jews who have come to faith in Christ over the centuries. In the first few centuries of the Church, there appears to have been a large migration of Jews into the faith. But all that notwithstanding, the Jewish people as such have not believed in the Messiah that all their sacred books talk about. Those Jews who have come to Christ have tended to lose, over the course of a few generations, their identity as Jews. For example, our family is a Gentile family, even though my wife's great grandfather was a Jewish rabbi. Those Jews who have kept their cultural identity have been those who have kept their distance from Jesus Christ. Paul is here talking about a Jewish return to Christ that would be as public and as visible as their rejection of Him was. This was not something that a number of individual Jews could just drift into. This prophecy will not be completed until we can say that Judaism is Christian. And when that happens, there will be no middle wall of partition between Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:14).

### GODLY PROVOCATION:

The word Paul uses for "provoke to jealousy" in verse 11 is the same word he uses here in verse 14. He wanted to make much of the fact that Gentiles were coming into salvation, were coming into the inheritance of Abraham, so that Jews would be stirred up by this and respond by coming to Christ. This is all in Deuteronomy, and it demonstrates that we are talking about something that goes far beyond what we evangelicals consider to be a "good testimony" about how Jesus saved us. We are talking about cultures, and we are talking about cultural jealousy. This tactic of God's was predicted in the latter part of Deuteronomy, and it is the same way that God worked when He was blessing the Jewish during the times of the older covenant. This is how God works. "Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations, which shall hear all these statutes, and say, Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people. For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them, as the LORD our God is in all things that we call upon him for?" (Deut. 4:6-7).

### THE JEW THING:

One of the great tragedies in the history of the Church thus far is that we have not understood the evangelistic potency of cultural identity and cohesion, rightly held and rightly understood. Instead of provoking the Jews to jealousy, which is God's game plan, we have been envious and jealous of them, falling into the anti-gospel of anti-Semitism. And then, when we are feeling bad about that (as we ought to) we as a result abandon all attempts at building biblical culture and cohesion, believing that this sort of thing results in things like the Holocaust. In all this, we are refusing to do what our Master told us to do. We are being like that servant in Proverbs, the one who is smoke in the eyes of the one who sent him (Prov. 10:26).



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