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Fullness of the Nations

J.K. McKee revised 12 August, 2019

Proponents of the Two-House teaching commonly claim that the “fullness of the Gentiles/nations” in Romans 11:25, is the same as that prophesied by Jacob in Genesis 48:19. Is there any merit to the “fullness of the Gentiles/nations” being those of the Lost Tribes of Ephraim?

Within the Patriarch Jacob’s blessing of his grandson Ephraim in Genesis 48:19, it is stated that “his descendants shall become a multitude of nations” (NASU). It is fair to say that this would suggest some level of abundance. Proponents of the Two-House teaching, in seeing *melo-ha’goyim* (מְלֵאֵי הַגּוֹיִם) or “fullness of the nations” in Genesis 48:19, frequently draw the conclusion that this is what is being referred to in Romans 11:25 when the Apostle Paul refers to how “a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (NASU). Two-House proponents conclude that “the fullness of the Gentiles/nations,” is in actuality the masses of the Lost Tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim. Once these people come to a recognition of their apparently lost Israelite heritage, then what is anticipated regarding “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26) will take place.¹

It is fair to say that Two-House proponents have not done a very good job with considering alternative interpretations or approaches to Genesis 48:18 and Romans 11:25. When Jacob foresaw that his grandson Ephraim would become *melo-ha’goyim*, did this automatically mean that the physical descendants of Ephraim would become multiple, non-Semitic ethnic groups in the future, something caused by the exile of the Northern Kingdom? While the Hebrew *goyim* can certainly be applied to different ethnic groups, it is also unavoidable from the Tanach how the Hebrew *goyim* as “nations” can refer to the tribes of Israel themselves. Ezekiel 2:3 states, “I send you to the Children of Israel, to the rebellious nations [*el-goyim*, אֱלֵ-גוֹיִם] that have rebelled against Me; they and their fathers have defiantly sinned against Me; they and their fathers have defiantly sinned against Me to this very day” (ATS). Ephraim becoming *melo-ha’goyim* is commonly interpreted by examiners to speak to how the Northern Kingdom of Israel, would also be known as Ephraim. So, the “fullness of the nations” in Genesis 48:19 really concerns how Ephraim would become a designate name for the Northern Kingdom. As Jewish scholar Richard Elliot Friedman indicates in his *Commentary on the Torah*,

“The unusual phrase *mēlō-haggōyīm* is usually taken to mean a multitude of nations, but that makes no particular sense in terms of the fate of the single tribe of Ephraim. Elsewhere *mēlō* can mean a full unit among a group (as in 2 Sam 8:2). It may mean here that Ephraim will be thought of as a nation, for Ephraim later comes to dominate the kingdom of Israel, and the name Ephraim is sometimes used to refer to the entire Israelite kingdom (Isa 7:2-17; Hos 5:3; 6:10; 7:1).”²

¹ If necessary, do consult the book *Israel in Future Prophecy* by J.K. McKee. While this writer has little issue with addressing the subject matter of the Divided Kingdom period in Ancient Israel, and what happened to the Northern Kingdom exiles, it cannot go overlooked how he is also a strong critic of the Two-House sub-movement, its hype, and its sensationalism.

² Richard Elliot Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 158.

Linguistically speaking, Two-House proponents making a connection between “fullness of the nations” in Genesis 48:19 and Romans 11:25 is not on as firm a footing as they would like it to be. The Septuagint renders *melo-ha’goyim* in Genesis 48:19 as *plēthos ethnōn* (πλήθος ἐθνῶν) or “a multitude of nations” (NETS), whereas the source text of Romans 11:25 has to *plērōma tōn ethnōn* (τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν) or “the fullness of the Gentiles/nations.” The term *plērōma* or “fullness” in Romans 11:25, is affected by its immediate usage in Romans 11:12, with Paul detailing the anticipated salvation of his fellow Jews in the future: “If their trespass means riches for the world, and their impoverishment means riches for the nations, how much more will their fullness [*plērōma*] mean!” (Kingdom New Testament). **A proper interpretation and application of “the fullness of the nations” in Romans 11:25, will take into consideration the previous usage of “fullness” in Romans 11:12.**

This writer has argued that “fullness of the nations” in Romans 11:25 involves a qualitative fullness, where a group of non-Jewish Believers of stellar spiritual and moral aptitude, will emerge on the scene of history—and be used by God mightily as beacons of His love, grace, and mercy to a Jewish people which has widely dismissed Yeshua the Messiah (cf. Romans 11:31). The following is an excerpt from his 2014 commentary *Romans for the Practical Messianic*:

11:25 One of the most important passages of the New Testament, for generally all of today’s Messianic movement, is understandably Romans chs. 9-11. To review, in this vignette the Apostle Paul expresses some of his deep anxiety and concern for his fellow Jews, who by this time in the mid-First Century, appear to be widely rejecting Yeshua as Savior. In communicating to the Roman Believers, whom he is preparing to visit, he emotes many of his concerns for the salvation of his fellow kinsfolk, rightly recognizing how God is not at all finished with them—but also how the good news has been widely embraced by the nations for some Divine purpose. Romans chs. 9-11 speak very salvation-historical, as Tanach passages from the history of Ancient Israel are appealed to. Within this absolutely “loaded” section of text, Paul states something very poignantly to the non-Jewish Believers in Rome, many of whom run the serious *and absolutely deplorable and condemnable* risk of gloating over the widescale Jewish non-acceptance of Yeshua. Paul warned them to be quite sober, careful, and aware of the negative potential of what many of them were thinking. Paul issued the directive,

“For I do not want you, brethren, to be ignorant of this mystery—lest you be wise in your own eyes—that a partial hardening has come upon Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (Romans 11:25, TLV).

This section of Paul’s letter, Romans 11:25-29 to the end of Romans ch. 11, has an important salvation history trajectory to it: “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26). No one in today’s broad Messianic movement denies that involved with this will be a significant salvation of the Jewish people in the Last Days, which we have already started to witness via the presence of the modern Messianic Jewish movement. In writing to the non-Jewish Believers in Rome, Paul urged them not to “be wise in your own conceits” (KJV). This is because Israel has been hardened, until a point in the future when “the fullness of the nations” has entered in. Much of what is to take place, he notably labels as a “mystery,” which might require some unconventional, or at least uncustomary thinking, on the part of various readers and interpreters.

The fact that Romans 11:25 is labeled as a “mystery” or *mustērion* (μυστήριον) is important to recognize, given how other mysteries appear elsewhere in Scripture. The dream of King Nebuchadnezzar revealed to Daniel was a mystery (Daniel 2:18-29); Yeshua’s Incarnation is a mystery (1 Timothy 3:16); the summing up of all things in Messiah is a mystery (Ephesians 1:9-10); the equal inclusion of Jews and non-Jews in the *ekklēsia* is a mystery (Ephesians 3:3-6); the change anticipated at the resurrection of the dead is a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51).

Certainly to be aware of, from a chronological standpoint, is that “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26) not occurring “until the fullness of the nations comes in” (LITV), is often thought to be a reversal of what is depicted in both the Tanach or Old Testament, as well as in ancient Jewish literature. What is widely depicted is instead a massive salvation or renewal of Israel proper, and then the nations at large recognizing Israel’s God and being incorporated into the Kingdom. A selection of passages from the Tanach, Apocrypha, and Pseudepigrapha is worth noting:

“Now it will come about that in the last days the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains, and will be raised above the hills; and all the nations will stream to it. And many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that He may teach us concerning His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For the law will go forth from Zion and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isaiah 2:2-3, NASU).

“Many nations will come and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD and to the house of the God of Jacob, that He may teach us about His ways and that we may walk in His paths.’ For from Zion will go forth the law, even the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Micah 4:2, NASU).

“Many nations will join themselves to the LORD in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that the LORD of hosts has sent Me to you” (Zechariah 2:11, NASU).

“Then it will come about that any who are left of all the nations that went against Jerusalem will go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to celebrate the Feast of Booths” (Zechariah 14:16, NASU).

Also John E. Hartley, *New International Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 354; Kenneth A. Matthews, *New American Commentary: Genesis 11:27-50:26*, Vol 1b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 881.

“Many nations will come from afar to the name of the Lord God, bearing gifts in their hands, gifts for the King of heaven. Generations of generations will give you joyful praise” (Tobit 13:11, RSV).

“Then all the Gentiles will turn to fear the Lord God in truth, and will bury their idols. All the Gentiles will praise the Lord, and his people will give thanks to God, and the Lord will exalt his people. And all who love the Lord God in truth and righteousness will rejoice, showing mercy to our brethren” (Tobit 14:6-7, RSV).

“The Lord himself is his kind, the hope of the one who has a strong hope in God. He shall be compassionate to all the nations (who) reverently (stand) before him” (*Psalms of Solomon* 17:34).³

“And thereafter the Lord himself will arise upon you, the light of righteousness with healing and compassion in his wings. He will liberate every captive of the sons of men from Beliar, and every spirit of error will be trampled down. He will turn all nations to being zealous for him” (*Testament of Zebulun* 9:8).⁴

“But in your allotted place will be the temple of God, and the latter temple will exceed the former in glory. The twelve tribes shall be gathered there and all the nations, until such time as the Most High shall send forth his salvation through the ministration of the unique prophet” (*Testament of Benjamin* 9:2).⁵

In the view of Douglas J. Moo, “Some OT and Jewish texts predict that Gentiles will join the worship of the Lord in the last day; and some of them suggest that it is the Lord’s glory revealed in a rejuvenated and regathered Israel that will stimulate Gentiles’ interest. But wholly novel was the idea that the inauguration of the eschatological age would involve setting aside the majority of Jews while Gentiles streamed in to enjoy the blessings of salvation and that only when that stream had been exhausted would Israel as a whole experience these blessings.”⁶ It is a slight challenge, especially when one considers the tenor of Peter’s dynamic preaching in Acts chs. 2-3, to think that a big part of the mystery involving the salvation of the nations, is how the entry of some group from the nations, will eventually culminate in Israel’s total redemption.

For those who have a high view of Scripture, and who believe in the literal restoration of the Jewish people to the Holy Land and fulfillment of the various prophetic words above—it is not as though these prophecies are not going to take place. Yet what began with the redemption of Israel proper in the early First Century, resulted in a widescale Jewish rejection of Yeshua of Nazareth by the mid-First Century. Only a remnant of Paul’s own people recognized Yeshua, but this was not something inconsistent with past Biblical history (Romans 11:3-5). So, with the expectation of Israel’s Kingdom being fully restored still on the horizon (Acts 1:6), a “mystery” of the nations coming in—who were doubtlessly receiving Israel’s Messiah en masse—had to be weighed by Paul into the equation.

Paul’s intention in Romans 11:25-29ff was to get the non-Jewish Believers in Rome off of any anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic ideas they may have been harboring, because of the widespread Jewish rejection of Yeshua. He wanted them to recognize the mystery to unfold, with a selection of unique renderings offered for *hina mē ēte [par’] heautois phronimoi* (ὅνα μὴ ἦτε [παρ’] ἑαυτοῖς φρόνιμοι): “lest ye should be wise in your own conceits” (KJV), “so that you may not be complacent about your own discernment” (NEB), “lest you become unduly self-satisfied” (God’s New Covenant-Cassirer), “you mustn’t get the wrong idea and think too much of yourselves” (Kingdom New Testament). It is already to be observed that the breaking off of natural branches from the Jewish people, has enabled there to be room made for wild branches from the nations (Romans 11:17-18), thus causing non-Jewish Believers to benefit from the error made by Paul’s fellow Jews in rejecting Messiah. But rather than be haughty or self-righteous over this dilemma, such non-Jewish Believers are to recognize the important role they are to play in the corporate salvation of the Jewish people, and indeed, the consummation of the Messianic Kingdom itself!

A reader of Romans 11:25 needs to be aware that there are value judgments present among English versions over how to render *hoti pōrosis apo merous tō Israēl gegonen* (ὅτι πώρωσις ἀπὸ μέρους τῶ Ἰσραὴλ γέγονεν), which the Brown and Comfort interlinear presents as, “that hardness in part – to Israel has happened.”⁷ Most notable would be different renderings such as “a partial hardening has happened to Israel” (NASU), versus “a hardening has come upon part of Israel” (RSV/NRSV). (The CJB has, “It is that stoniness, to a degree, has come upon Isra’el.”) Much of this comes down to whether *meros* (μέρος), “a part, share” (LS),⁸ is approached as a straight noun, or is approached adverbially. James D.G. Dunn details how the adverbial approach to *meros* is imperative, because it conveys the point of how Paul was concerned with the total redemption of his whole people, and not just individuals here and there:

³ R.B. Wright, trans., “Psalms of Solomon,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 638.

⁴ H.C. Kee, trans., “Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs,” in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), 807.

⁵ Ibid. 827.

⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), pp 716-717.

⁷ Brown and Comfort, 564.

⁸ LS, 499.

“As in its other occurrences in Paul ἀπό μέρους [*apo merous*] should be taken adverbially, that is, with πώρωςις [*pōrōsis*] rather than Ἰσραὴλ [*Israel*]⁹—so ‘partial hardening or blindness’ (BGD, NEB; cf. NIV) rather than ‘part of Israel’ (RSV, NJB); cf. 15:15; 2 Cor 1:14; 2:5. It is not unimportant that Paul still retains a concept of Israel as a unified whole: the people suffering partial blindness, rather than only part of the people suffering blindness; even in his criticism of his people Paul still feels himself to be part of a single people.”⁹

A partial hardening will presumably persist upon Paul’s Jewish people, until a future point in time, labeled by him as: *achri ou to plērōma tōn ethnōn eisēlthē* (ἄχρι οὐ τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰσέλθῃ), “until the fullness of the nations comes in” (Kingdom New Testament). In contemporary examination, there has been an overwhelming dominance of Calvinistic exegesis on this clause, reflected in the common English translation one will encounter of *to plērōma tōn ethnōn*: “the full number of the Gentiles” (RSV/NRSV/ESV, NIV). The NLT actually has the paraphrase, “until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ.” Reflecting this perspective, C.E.B. Cranfield states, “The phrase τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν [*to plērōma tōn ethnōn*] is probably to be explained as meaning the full number of the elect from among the Gentiles or the added number needed in order to make up that full total,”¹⁰ meaning those individuals from the nations believed to be predestined to salvation. Sometimes this is connected with the mass of people seen in Revelation 7:9, but more commonly Luke 21:24: “Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled” (NASU).

It is to be appropriately recognized that the best approach to what *to plērōma tōn ethnōn* (τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν) actually is, will take into consideration the immediate, previous usage of *plērōma* in Romans 11:12. The Apostle Paul has just asked a direct question about the then-present, widescale Jewish rejection of Messiah Yeshua: “If their trespass means riches for the world, and their impoverishment means riches for the nations, how much more will their fullness mean!” (Romans 11:12, Kingdom New Testament). If the corporate rejection of the Jewish people to the Jewish Messiah results in the world coming to a saving knowledge of Him, “how much more their fullness” (TLV)? Here, as noted, the term *plērōma* (πλήρωμα) is best taken to mean “**that which is brought to fullness or completion**” (BDAG).¹¹

...[N]ot all are agreed that *plērōma* in Romans 11:12 should be viewed in a quantitative sense, but instead a qualitative sense regarding what will happen when Israel proper recognizes its Messiah. Almost no major interpreter, though, takes *plērōma* in Romans 11:25 in a qualitative sense, although it is surely a legitimate exegetical option. If the immediate, previous usage of *plērōma* in Romans 11:12 is taken into consideration—regarding the spiritual fullness that the Jewish people are to have when they recognize Yeshua as the Messiah—then some kind of spiritual, ethical, and moral fullness (and likely also intellectual fullness) of those from the nations who have also acknowledged Him, can also be posited. This is, at least, partially observed in *achri ou to plērōma tōn ethnōn eisēlthē* being rendered as “until the Gentile world enters in its fullness” (CJB), or “until the Gentiles have been admitted in full strength” (NEB).

When *to plērōma tōn ethnōn* or “the fullness of the nations” is approached from the perspective of “fullness” being qualitative, then the question of what “the fullness” is to regard or involve gets necessarily posed. It should be obvious that when Paul’s letter was read to a mixed audience of people in Rome, that the Greek and Roman Believers should have been stimulated to be “fullness” in the sense of wanting to better understand, appreciate, and integrate Paul’s message. Being “fullness,” in Romans 11:25, should involve being able and capable to understand the ramifications of what is stated in Romans 11:26-27. And as we should most especially think, and will discuss further, being “fullness” on the part of non-Jewish Believers must involve understanding and implementing Paul’s further word, “For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy” (Romans 11:31, NASU).

The ancient First Century challenge, which has widely persisted throughout the centuries, has been that far too many non-Jewish Believers have not at all taken seriously Paul’s word against being self-wise and self-concerned—much less being some sort of spiritual, ethical, and moral “fullness”—when it comes to their relationship with the Jewish people.

What if the “fullness of the nations” arriving on the scene of history does not involve some kind of predestined number of non-Jewish Believers coming to salvation, or some other proposed group of people—**but instead a spiritually mature group of Believers from the nations who are grand vessels of mercy to the Jewish people?** Consider how difficult it has been to see this manifested in human history. Holding to “the fullness of the nations” entering in, being a group of Believers of an excelsior spiritual, ethical, and moral variety—and thusly bringing about the full restoration of Israel’s Kingdom realm, consummate via the Messiah’s arrival (Romans 11:26-27)—is probably the most difficult interpretation. And it is not difficult because it accounts for how *plērōma* appears in either Romans 11:12 or 11:25; it is difficult because it challenges all of today’s non-Jewish Believers to evaluate whether or not they are truly demonstrating the mercy of Yeshua the Messiah, and significant empathy and understanding, toward their Jewish brothers and sisters. This involves, on the part of today’s non-Jewish Believers, a great deal of effort, spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical reasoning to strive to understand the Jewish struggle throughout history—as opposed to some of the arrogant and obnoxious trends which have been witnessed in recent years.¹²

⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 38b. (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 679

¹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 575; also Moo, 719.

¹¹ BDAG, 829.

¹² Consult the various observations made in the chapter, “Anti-Semitism in the Two-House Movement,” in the author’s book, *Israel in Future Prophecy*.

Non-Jewish Believers in today's Messianic movement, who are able to not only read a letter like Romans, but also consider the complicated history of Judaism and Christianity—**should be striving to be “fullness.”** They have a unique place in today's Messianic community, because of how conscious the salvation of the Jewish people and the redemption of Israel are, in our collective psyche. While such people should be able to make efforts to be everything they can be in Messiah Yeshua, they should especially be able to grasp the essential spiritual reality of what is communicated in Romans 11:26-27, living forth its imperatives in their own lives, as a realized eschatology to be entirely manifested when Yeshua returns and the Kingdom is fully restored to Israel (Acts 1:6). In living forth the essential components of what is stated in Romans 11:26-27, they should be able to make Jewish non-Believers jealous for Messiah faith (Romans 11:11), and herald the completion among God's corporate people what individual people are already to an extent experiencing.