

The Israel of God (Gal. 6:16)

I. Definitions

- A. Paul concludes his letter to the Galatian believers by reaffirming his trust in the cross of Christ for both Jew and Gentile (6:11-14). He then gives the reason: "For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And those who will walk by this rule, peace, and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (6:15-16 NASB). What entity is called "the Israel of God" in this verse (Gal. 6:16)?
- B. Many see these texts fulfilled not in ethnic descendants of Abraham (i.e., Jews), but in the NT church. This is evident among both amillennial and covenant premillennial scholars. Interestingly, even at least one dispensational scholar makes a similar identification.

II. Representative Examples of Identifying the Church as Israel

- A. Amillennial: "The new Israel" or "The Israel of God" (emphasis mine in each case below)
1. John Calvin: "...*the Israel of God*...includes all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, who were united into one church."¹
 2. Matthew Henry: "...the law of love must be conveyed with new obligations to *the new Israel* of God, to the gospel church..."²
 3. K.L. & M.A. Schmidt (TDNT, 1976): "What is true of ancient Israel is applied by the apostle to *the new Israel*, the ἄγιοι, *the Church* of God in Jesus Christ."³
 4. James Smith (1992): "Second, *the people of God are called 'Israel.'* The remnant of the old Israel (v. 13) plus the converted Gentiles would constitute the New Israel (Gal 6:16). Messianic Israel would be a nation based on grace, not race, on faith, not biological descent (Matt 21:43; 1 Pet 2:9)."⁴
 5. G. K. Beale (1998): "To identify 'Israel' with only the ethnic nation would be introducing a new idea into the letter [to the Galatians]."⁵
 6. O. Palmer Robertson (2000): "Paul indicates that all believers in Christ, whether or not they are Jews externally, are truly *the Israel of God*."⁶
- B. Covenant Premillennial: "Spiritual Israel" or "The true Israel of God"
1. G. E. Ladd (1977): "[Paul] applies prophecies to the church which in their Old Testament setting belong to literal Israel; he calls the church sons, the seeds of Abraham. He calls believers the true circumcision. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul sees the church as *spiritual Israel*."⁷

¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 186 (emphasis mine).

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), 1 Jn 2:7.

³ K. L. and M. A. Schmidt, † πάροικος, † παροικία, † παροικέω in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 5:851 (emphasis mine).

⁴ James E. Smith, *The Minor Prophets* (Joplin, Mo.: College Press, 1992), Zeph 3:14 (emphasis mine).

⁵ Gregory K. Beale, "The Old Testament Background of 'Peace and Mercy' in Galatians 6:15-16" (unpublished paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, 20 November 1998), 3.

⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000), 44, n. 11 (emphasis mine).

⁷ George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism," in *The Meaning of the Millennium*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove: IVP, 1977), 25.

2. Wayne Grudem (1994): “What further statement could be needed in order for us to say with assurance that the church has now become the *true Israel of God* and will receive all the blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament?”⁸

C. Dispensational: “A new Israel”

1. Dispensational scholars do not claim that the church is “the new Israel,” given that they typically distinguish between Israel as the ethnic offspring of Abraham in contrast to the church as the spiritual offspring. However, at least one Dallas Seminary professor below makes a similar identification, though not calling the church “*the* new Israel” but “*a* new Israel.”
2. Eugene H. Merrill: “Even Israel’s failure, however, would not imperil the purposes of God, for, as New Testament revelation makes clear, the Lord Jesus Christ—the suffering Servant of Isaiah—is in *Himself a new Israel, as is His Body the church*. Until its era is done, the church has been commissioned to transmit the message of redemption—a task Israel failed to do. But praise be to God, His promise to Israel is not abrogated—not by Israel’s Old Testament disobedience or by the subsequent role of the church. For He will regenerate His ancient people and thus qualify them in ages to come to bring to fruition the grand design for which He had called and elected them (Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 30:1–10; Jer. 31:27–34; 33:19–26; Ezek. 36:22–38; Rom. 11:25–32). This is the theology of the Pentateuch.”⁹

III. Do You Agree or Disagree?

To explore your ideas on this vital subject, please mark them as A, U, or D beside each statement below to show whether you Agree, are Unsure, or Disagree with each statement.

- A. Biblically, there exists a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church.
- B. It is proper to call the church “the new Israel.”
- C. There is a prophetic future for national Israel.

IV. Conclusion

Some think this is a lot of haggling over a simple name. Why worry about what we call the church? This is because one’s view on this affects one’s understanding of hundreds of texts. The NT mentions Israel 66 times, but not one of these texts applies the term to the church.¹⁰

“And those who will walk by this rule, peace, and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God” (NASB, 6:16). Here, Paul notes two groups: (1) Gentile believers who live by grace, and (2) Jewish believers who live by grace. He notes these two groups in the preceding verses, where he emphasizes the circumcision and the uncircumcision. Both groups can now be blessed in the gospel.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994), 863.

⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, “A Theology of the Pentateuch,” ed. Roy B. Zuck, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 87 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ The closest one can come to this is Galatians 6:16, where Paul separately blesses both believing Gentile Galatians and believing Jews: “**Peace and mercy** from God are available to those who walk according to **this rule**, that is, according to the message of salvation by grace through faith alone. This blessing is pronounced on believing Galatians and on believing Jews. (The NIV errs in trans. **even to the Israel of God** rather than ‘and upon the Israel of God’ as in the NASB.) While some believe that ‘Israel of God’ is the church, the evidence does not support such a conclusion. First, the repetition of the preposition (‘upon’ or ‘to’) indicates two groups are in view. Second, all the 65 other occurrences of the term ‘Israel’ in the New Testament refer to Jews. It would thus be strange for Paul to use ‘Israel’ here to mean Gentile Christians. Third, Paul elsewhere referred to two kinds of Israelites—believing Jews and unbelieving Jews (cf. Rom. 9:6). Lest it be thought that Paul is anti-Semitic, he demonstrated by means of this benediction his deep love and concern for true Israel, that is, Jews who had come to Christ” (Donald K. Campbell, “Galatians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-1985], 2:611).