

In Depth: Israel of God

The last words of Gal 6:16, “even upon the Israel of God” (καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ Θεοῦ), could be interpreted to refer to ethnic Israel or to the church of Jesus Christ. Scholars dispute whether Paul refers (1) to a remnant of Jewish believers within the church of Jesus Christ, or (2) to Gentile believers (along with Jewish believers) who constitute the new people of God—the new and true Israel.³⁶ If the reference is to ethnic Israel, it is limited to Jewish believers in Christ, for it is “the Israel of God,” not merely ethnic Israel. Burton argues that the order of the words in the benediction supports a reference to ethnic Israel, for if, says Burton, Paul had the church in mind, “mercy” would precede “peace,”³⁸ and he sees peace as the petition for the church, while mercy is the request for unredeemed Jews. Richardson argues that peace belongs to those who conform to the rule, while mercy relates to a distinct group: the Israel of God. He also contends that “Israel” does not denote the church until the writings of Justin Martyr in AD 160. Finally, Johnson argues that the conjunction used here (καί) almost certainly means “and,” indicating that ethnic Israel is in view.

It is unlikely that the dispute can be resolved on the basis of grammar alone. Köstenberger cautiously suggests that the nouns “peace” and “mercy” belong to the same implied “to be” verb, so that the Israel of God is not a distinct ethnic entity. Furthermore, the conjunction here (καί) may also be construed as ascensive (meaning “even”), and hence to identify the church as God’s Israel is exegetically possible, though such an issue must be resolved by context. It is true that in most instances in Paul “Israel” refers to ethnic Israel (Rom 9:6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26; Eph 2:12; Phil 3:5), though the referent in the second use in Rom 9:6 and in Rom 11:26 is debated. The predominant usage is not of great significance, however, for most of the uses are in Rom 9–11, where the context makes clear that Paul is discussing the fate of ethnic Israel.

Furthermore, in 1 Cor 10:18 Paul speaks of (lit.) “Israel according to flesh,” which at least suggests that there may be a contrast between Israel according to the flesh and Israel according to the Spirit, and the latter could possibly include Gentile Christians. The term “Israel” is not decisive in any case, for context as always must be determinative, and here the arguments for Israel referring to the church of Jesus Christ, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, are compelling. The key question in Galatians is whether one must become a Jew and be circumcised to belong to the people of God. Must one receive circumcision to belong to the family of Abraham? The false teachers argued that circumcision and observance of the law were required to be part of Abraham’s family. But Paul has argued throughout the letter that circumcision is unnecessary and that those who put their faith in Christ belong to the family of Abraham. When he speaks of “the Israel of God” at the conclusion of the letter, where he rehearses the major themes of the letter, he is driving home the point that believers in Christ, members of the new creation, are the true Israel.

Such an interpretation fits with the whole of the letter, for believers in Christ are the true sons of Abraham. But if they are Abraham’s children and belong to his family, then they belong to the Israel of God. It would be highly confusing to the Galatians, after arguing for the equality of Jew and Gentile in Christ (3:28) and after emphasizing that believers are Abraham’s children, for Paul to argue in the conclusion that only Jews who believe in Jesus belong to the Israel of God. By doing so a wedge would be introduced between Jews and Gentiles at the end of the letter, suggesting that the latter were not part of the true Israel. Such a wedge would play into the hands of the opponents, who would argue that to be part of the true Israel one must be circumcised.⁴⁸

Instead, Paul confirms one of the major themes of the letter. All believers in Christ are part of the true Israel, part of God’s Israel. This fits with what Paul says elsewhere when he says believers are the true circumcision (Phil 3:3). Since believers in Christ are the true family of Abraham and the true circumcision, they are also part of the true Israel. Beale offers another argument for seeing a reference to the church in “Israel of God”: the OT background. He suggests that Isa 54 functions as the background, and particularly 54:10, where God’s mercy and peace are promised to Israel. Further, the peace and mercy for Israel results in a new creation (cf. 54:11–12), which Paul emphasizes in Gal 6:15. Beale suggests that the mercy and peace promised to Israel will be the portion of eschatological Israel—the new Israel composed of Jews and Gentiles.

New creation themes are clearly present here, and so Paul may be hearkening back to Isa 54 and other texts with new creation themes. Scholars may dispute whether the connection to 54:10 is established since the words “peace and mercy” in Gal 6:16 are not in the same order in Isa 54:10. The case would be more convincing if more verbal parallels could be adduced. In any case, the decisive argument for seeing the church as the Israel of God is the argument of Galatians as a whole.

Galatians 6:1–18 (ESV)

¹ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. ⁵ For each will have to bear his own load.

⁶ Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

¹¹ See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand. ¹² It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. ¹⁴ But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶ And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God. ¹⁷ From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. ¹⁸ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

I. **Restore the fallen, bear one another's burdens (1-5)**

Having the Spirit does not remove the ___[possibility] of sin. The goal is ___[restoration]__.

In contrast to [teachers of the law](Matt. 23:4), those in the Messiah follow him in ___[bearing burdens]___
Even so, we are each accountable for ___[ourselves]__

II. **Do good, support the true teachers (6-10)**

True *Koinonia* almost always includes some kind of ___[financial element]_____.

In this context, sowing to the flesh vs. Spirit =
___[treasures on earth]__ vs. ___[treasures in heaven]__

III. **Dead to the world, boasting in the Messiah (11-18)**

Paul emphasizes the ___[authenticity]___ and ___[urgency] of the letter.

The false teachers real motivation is avoiding ___[persecution]_____

Boasting - Jer. 9:23-26

Three options for the Israel of God:

1. ___[Ethnic Israel]_____
2. ___[Remnant of Jewish Believers]___
3. ___[All those in the Messiah]_____

Paul bears the true ___[marks]___ of the Messiah
in contrast to the false teachers' ___[circumcision]__