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THE "ISRAEL OF GOD" IN GALATIANS 6:16

by
Jonathan Pratt[1]

Systematicians viewing the title of this essay might anticipate a face-off between dispensational and covenant theologians as arguments from each side are presented. However, the meaning of "Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 requires an exegetical rather than dogmatic approach.[2] This is not to say that theology and exegesis stand at opposite poles on the hermeneutical playing field, for all acknowledge that it is impossible to engage in one without the other. Yet, by looking at syntactical, historical, and discursive elements related to "Israel of God" and the Galatian context in which this phrase is found, I hope to present an exegetical answer to the question, "What group of people is Paul referring to when he uses "Israel of God?" Indeed, I cannot escape my own theological presuppositions while approaching this question, but I hope that my exegetical findings will provide helpful material for establishing an accurate theological interpretation.[3]

Two suggested answers exist to the question I have raised: (1) "Israel of God" includes both Gentiles and Jews, i.e., the church[4];

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[1]Dr. Pratt is Vice President of Academic Affairs and Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Plymouth, MN.

[2]Both S. Lewis Johnson, "Paul and 'The Israel of God': An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 181–82, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Identity of the ἸΣΡΑΗΛ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ (Israel of God) in Galatians 6:16," *Faith & Mission* 19 (Fall 2001): 3, make a plea for an exegetical rather than theological approach.

[3]D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament," in *Scripture and Truth,* ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 65–95. Carson argues that systematic theology is not only a possibility but that it is a necessary goal of exegesis and biblical theology.

[4]This is the majority view. See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians,* trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (1865; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957); N. A. Dahl, "Zur Auslegung von Gal 6:16," *Judaica* 6 (1950): 161–70; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. Henry Zylstra, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953); Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983); Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990); Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, Black's New Testament Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson,

(2) "Israel of God" includes only ethnic Jews.[5] I will first look at the strongest arguments used to support "Israel of God" as including the church before turning to those which contend that "Israel of God" refers to ethnic Jews alone. I will follow this up with a summary and conclusion in which I will support the view I find most compelling.

"ISRAEL OF GOD" INCLUDES GENTILES AND JEWS

Three main lines of argument form the foundation for the Israel-is-the-church position. Two are contextual in nature and the third relates to the use of new creation ideas found in the OT. In each section I will provide a description of the argument itself followed by the critiques that opponents of the view have given.

1993); Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "Gal. 6:11–18: A Hermeneutical Key to the Galatian Letter," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28 (1993): 90–107; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997); G. K. Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Galatians 6,16b," *Biblica* 80 (1999): 204–23; Köstenberger, "Identity of ἸΣΡΑΗΛ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ"; Gordon D. Fee, *Galatians,* Pentecostal Commentary (Dorset: Deo, 2007); Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians,* Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Christopher W. Cowan, "Context is Everything: 'The Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14.3 (2010): 78–85; Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010); N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God: Parts III and IV,* Vol 4 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 1133–51; Ole Jakob Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16: An Overview and Assessment of the Key Arguments," *Currents in Biblical Research* 15 (2016): 123–40.

[5]John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (1869; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.); Ernest deWitt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians,* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1921); George S. Duncan, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, Moffat New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934); Gottlob Schrenk, "Was bedeutet 'Israel Gottes'?" *Judaica* 5 (1949): 81–94; idem, "Der Segenswunsch nach der Kampfepestel," *Judaica* 6 (1950): 170–90; D. W. B. Robinson, "The Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians," *Australian Biblical Review* 13 (1965): 29–48; Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 10 (Cambridge: University Press, 1969); W. D. Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977–1978): 4–39; Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches of Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text,* New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God'"; Michael Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians? Exegetical Studies on a Polemical Letter and on Paul's Theology*, trans. Robert L. Brawley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Susan Grove Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God: A Re-reading of Galatians 6.16 and Romans 9–11," *New Testament Studies* 56 (2010): 367–95; Jeff Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation: The Strategic Purpose of Galatians 6:11–17* (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

The Context of Galatians as a Whole

Without a doubt advocates of the Israel-is-the-church view consider Paul's argument in Galatians as the strongest reason to support their position.[6] N. T. Wright summarizes, "Paul's whole argument is that the one God has one family, not two, and that this one 'seed' consists of all those who believe in Jesus the Messiah, with no distinction of Jew and Greek, slave and free, male or female."[7]

Many have pointed to the structure of Paul's argument in Galatians using rhetorical criticism to unearth the main thesis and lines of support for it.[8] Thus, the *propositio* in 2:15–21 provides the thesis: justification by faith alone. The *probatio* or main body of the letter (3:1–4:31) provides arguments to support the thesis. Notably, several of these supporting arguments rely on a "replacement motif" such that Abraham's descendants are those who have faith rather than those who obey the law, regardless of their ethnic identity.[9] More specifically, faith rather than circumcision incorporates people into Christ. As a result, they become Abraham's seed (3:29), children of the promise like Isaac (4:26–28), and one in Christ Jesus (3:28).[10]

Schreiner's assessment of the overall context of Galatians is helpful in understanding why "Israel of God" could so easily be applied to the church as a whole:

> 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

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[6]Moo, *Galatians,* 403; Matera, *Galatians,* 232; Longenecker, *Galatians,* 298.

[7]Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1144.

[8]Betz, *Galatians,* 14–25, was the first to propose a detailed rhetorical structure for the entire argument of Galatians. Though many have disagreed with his overall approach (e.g. Schreiner, *Galatians,* 52–55), most continue to use the terms of Greek rhetoric he introduced (e.g. *exordium, narratio, propositio, probatio, exhortatio*) when referring to the various sections of Galatians in their writing.

[9]Charles A. Ray, Jr., "The Identity of the 'Israel of God,'" *Theological Educator* 50 (Fall 1994): 111. He further suggests that the presence of the Holy Spirit replaces the law; this is also demonstrated in the allegory of 4:21–31 where the free woman replaces the slave woman.

[10]Cowan, "Context is Everything," 80; Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16," 129. Kenneth Willis Clark, "The Israel of God," in *Studies in New Testament and Early Christian Literature: Essays in Honor of Allen P. Wikgren,* ed. David Aune (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 162–65, argues that Paul believed Gentiles to be incorporated into Judaism. Thus, they would have been referred to as the "Israel of God." His five points of support for such a view include: (1) Paul claims that they are spiritual descendants of Abraham; (2) Gentiles were required to be baptized, a Jewish rite; (3) Gentiles were required to observe Jewish dietary restrictions in not eating blood; (4) justification was central in the Jewish religion; and (5) many Gentiles continued association with synagogues even after conversion. While Clark's suggestion is creative, Paul was certainly *not* claiming that Gentiles were to become Jews. Paul's support of table fellowship with Gentiles (2:11–14), freedom from the Mosaic law (2:19; 5:1), and the rejection of circumcision (2:3; 5:11–12; 6:12–15) shows he had no inclination for his converts to enter the Jewish faith.

> 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.[11]

The message of unity between Jew and Gentile is undoubtedly the main reason Israel-is-the-church advocates use to defend their view. Yet even while Paul's concern in Galatians has been to argue for a unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ (3:28), there is ample evidence in the letter itself that Paul would specify ethnic Jews as God's Israel.[12] First, both Acts and Galatians demonstrate the existence of Jewish believers in the Galatian churches. The historical record of Acts is obvious,[13] and in Galatians itself Paul uses first person plural pronouns of himself and his Jewish readers as distinguished from his entire audience which included both Jews and Gentiles (2:15; 3:13, 23–25; 4:5).[14] Second, not only are there Jews among the readers of the epistle, but Paul acknowledges the Jewish church and its place in redemptive history.[15] He is reticent to

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[11]Schreiner, *Galatians,* 382.

[12]It would appear that Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1151, overstates things a bit in connection to this point about Paul's address to ethnic Jews: "If it were the case that Paul, suddenly at this late stage, meant something else by 'God's Israel'—meant, for instance, to refer either to all Jews, or to all Christian Jews, or to some subset of either of those whether now or in the future—then he would, quite simply, have made nonsense of the whole letter."

[13]Acts 13:43; 14:1 show that Jews believed the Gospel and were added to the newly formed churches. In both Antioch (13:45, 50) and Iconium (14:2, 5) the Jewish believers are distinguished from unbelieving Jews who seek to persecute the new Christians. This helps to explain the motivation of the Judaizers to avoid persecution by requiring circumcision of their converts (Gal 6:12); it also hints at the probability that the Judaizers are truly Christians and should be distinguished from those in Judaism (Ἰουδαϊσμῷ—1:13) who wanted to squash Christianity (Robinson, "Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers," 43).

[14]Robinson, "Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers," 34–38. One example: Paul begins by speaking about himself and his fellow Jews (the ἡμᾶς of 3:13) who were redeemed from the curse of the law by Christ's death and then expands the effects of that death to include the Gentiles with the result that *we* receive the promise of the Spirit (λάβωμεν of 3:14). Robinson's discussion anticipates the distinction between the inclusive and exclusive "we" summarized by Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 393–99. However, one area of inquiry that might yield fruitful results is the possibility of two subsets of exclusive "we" in Galatians: (1) 2:15 where Paul and his Galatian-Jewish readers are distinguished from the Galatian-Gentile readers of the epistle and (2) 2:5 where Paul, Barnabas and Titus are distinguished from the Galatian readers of the epistle.

[15]Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 106, 121–22. This is why it is *not* strange for Paul to bring up ethnic Jews at the end of the letter. He has hinted at it all along. Bachmann gives three lines of evidence: (1) 1:13; 2:10 show that the Jerusalem church and its opinions were significant to Paul; (2) the priority of Judaism in redemptive history is "not missing at all" in Galatians and is "just as in Romans," and Paul demonstrates this by his limiting remarks on the law (3:13–19), the reference to the sinful behavior of the Jews (2:16–17a; 3:19), the Christocentric narrowing of the

neglect the significant connection between the Galatian church and its Jewish origins. Bachmann's comment merits repeating, "Paul in principle places the Christian community that originated on a Jewish basis in an insoluble connection with the Jewish people. Their…*nucleus* is Jews and Jewish-Christians, and for the Apostle the future of Christianity is not conceivable without God's 'eschatological' loving care for Israel."[16] Third, Paul singles out the Judaizers in 6:12–13 as deserving special criticism, so it would be logical for him to recognize faithful Jewish believers—the "Israel of God"—in order to clarify to the majority Gentiles in the Galatian churches that their believing Jewish brothers and sisters could still be trusted.[17] Fourth, what better way could Paul encourage his hearers than by cheering on Jewish believers in the Galatian church "who, understanding the grace of God and its exclusion of any human works as the ground of redemption, had not succumbed to the subtle blandishments of the deceptive Judaizers?"[18]

In light of Paul's thinking about ethnic Jews in the Galatian church, it is altogether plausible to envision Paul thinking in this way:

> After all I have said about the temporary nature of the law, the unimportance of circumcision, and the other negative things about Judaism, I think my fellow Jews in these Galatian churches could use a bit of encouragement. Their being Jewish is not a hindrance to the work, so I want to specifically recognize them in a benediction. I want to say that you Jewish believers in the Galatian churches are a blessing; you represent the faithful remnant of Jews that has been a theme throughout Scripture; your presence is a reminder of the gracious work of God in forming the church out of the Jerusalem church to which all of our Christian churches are indebted.

Seen in this light, the "Israel of God" as ethnic Jews is not so nonsensical after all.

The Context of Galatians 6:11–17

Paul's letter closings typically reaffirm the points previously made in the body of the epistle and "provide important interpretive clues for a proper understanding of their respective letters."[19] Since Paul's use of

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descendants of Abraham (3:6–7, 16, 18, 29), the temporal priority of apostolic commission to Jews before Gentiles (2:8), and the fact that the Jerusalem pillars offered fellowship to Paul rather than the other way around (2:9); (3) the commitment to the "collection" for the poor of Jerusalem (2:9–10) shows a concern for Jewish believers as the "nucleus" of Christianity.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Earl D. Radmacher, *The Nature of the Church: A Biblical and Historical Study* (1978; repr., Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1996), 184–85.

[18]Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 192.

[19]Jeffrey A. D. Weima, "The Pauline Letter Closings: Analysis and Hermeneutical Significance," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 178. Betz, 313, believes that this section of Paul's letter "contains the interpretive clues to the understanding of

"Israel of God" occurs in his closing, most believe that he is summarizing ideas about this phrase already formulated earlier in the epistle.[20] Weima points to Paul's claim that Gentile Christians are legitimate heirs of Abraham who share fully in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, and he believes that "Israel of God" in the closing "reasserts the claim articulated in the letter as a whole."[21] N. T. Wright also raises the issue of the connection between this final paragraph and the introductory paragraph of the letter. He suggests that Paul's condemnation of any physical marks other than those from persecution (i.e., circumcision—6:11–15 and 6:17) does not permit the inclusion of a positive reference to ethnic Jews in 6:16.[22]

While these arguments regarding the letter closing are persuasive, there is reason to believe that 6:11–17 is actually not a formal letter closing but rather the conclusion of the body of Paul's letter.[23] As such this final paragraph of the body actually contains new material "intended to complete Paul's urgent plea for the Galatians to reject the agitators and their message and restore their allegiance to Paul and his gospel."[24] This is the first time we learn of the cowardice and duplicity of the Judaizers who seek to avoid persecution by having the Galatians circumcised so that they can boast in their flesh. It is likewise the first we hear of the "Israel of God." And this should not surprise us since Paul is not merely recapitulating points made earlier. Rather, he is picking up the pen (6:11) and offering concluding ideas that bring various blurry points made earlier into focus.

The OT Background of "New Creation"

The OT background of the benediction and its themes point to seeing "Israel of God" as composed of both Jews and Gentiles. G. K. Beale argues this point by showing that Isaiah 54:10 and its

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Paul's major concerns in the letter as a whole and should be employed as the hermeneutical key to the intentions of the Apostle." Longenecker, *Galatians,* 288–89, and Lightfoot, *Galatians*, 220, agree.

[20]Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 205; Ray, "Identity of the 'Israel of God,'" 113; E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 174.

[21]Weima, "Pauline Letter Closings," 196–97. Paul's belief that Gentiles are legitimate heirs flows from Paul's argument in 3:6–9 (an exposition of Abraham's faith); 3:14 (the purpose of Christ's death gives Gentiles access to the Abrahamic covenant; 3:15–18 (the true nature of the Abrahamic covenant); 3:26–29 (the application of the covenant to the Galatians); and 4:21–31 (Gentile Christians are true sons of Abraham).

[22]Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1145.

[23]Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation,* 260, suggests that this final paragraph has two objectives for Paul: (1) to bring his argument to its logical conclusion, and (2) to establish the basis for further correspondence with his audience.

[24]Ibid.

surrounding context of new creation ideas is the lens through which "Israel of God" should be viewed.[25] Beale is compelled to make the connection between Isaiah 54 and the benediction because of its reference to both "peace and mercy" (εἰρήνη καὶ ἔλεος) as well as to the new creation.[26] There are other possible influences on Gal 6:16 such as Ps 84 (LXX), the Qumran Hymn Scroll (1QH 13:5), and Jub 22:9, but the Isaiah text appears to have been the main one. As such the fact that Paul draws upon new creation themes (6:15) shows he believes the "Israel of God" is the eschatological Israel of the new creation and includes both Jews and Gentiles.[27]

Since the allusion to Isa 54 and its new creation theme is not clearly indicated in the context of Gal 6:16, it is questionable whether Paul was connecting new creation promises to Gentile inclusion in those promises and then to the usage of the phrase "Israel of God" as including the Jew-Gentile church. Several other suggestions have been offered with regard to the possible influences on Paul, some of which are stronger candidates than Beale's proposal.[28] The uncertainty surrounding the possible background influences of Paul's usage requires a good deal of restraint with regard to our assertions.

One further reason for pause relates to the connection of the benediction to καινή κτίσις. Paul's blessing is for those who follow κανόνι τούτῳ (this rule). But to what does "this rule" refer? Most believe that

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[25]Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 208–11. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1150, points to Paul's usage of Isa 54:1 in Gal 4:27 at the climactic point of the letter's argument such that Paul is merely restating this theme in the concluding paragraph.

[26]Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 222. Since Paul's reference to "those who follow this rule" (ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν) refers to the new creation in 6:15, it is clear that "Israel of God" is connected to these new creation themes introduced in Isa 54 and seen elsewhere in Isa 32–66. Also see Schreiner, *Galatians,* 383.

[27]Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 216–19, uses an interesting hermeneutical strategy to expand the application of the prophecy of Isa 54:10 to include Gentiles in the church. His method begins by noting the LXX of Isa 54 which connects the Gentiles' future enjoyment of eschatological blessing to Israel (Isa 54:5, 15 LXX). When Paul uses Isa 54, he has this connection in mind and draws upon it as he connects Gentiles to the "seed of Abraham" (Gal 3:16, 29). Now "in the new redemptive-historical epoch launched by Christ's death and resurrection, Gentiles merely need to move spiritually to Christ…and convert to faith in order to become true Israelites (216)." Since Paul had new creation ideas from Isa 54 rattling around in his head, he connected the "peace and mercy" of Isa 54 with new creation in Gal 6:16 and promised this blessing to the "Israel of God," i.e., the eschatological group of Jews and Gentiles who "participate in the blessings promised to Israel in the eschaton by identifying with Jesus, the true Israel and true seed of Abraham" (218).

[28]Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 79, suggests that the Jewish benediction, the *Shemoneh Esreh,* is the best candidate. Betz, *Galatians,* 321–22, agrees. See Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 207–8; Matera, *Galatians,* 226; and Dunn, *Galatians,* 344, for other proposals.

it refers to the closest reference, καινή κτίσις.[29] But Hubing argues (correctly) that 6:15 (οὔτε γάρ…καινή κτίσις) is grammatically subordinate to the main clause in 6:14 (ἐμοὶ δὲ…κἀγὼ κόσμῳ).[30] Thus, Paul's "rule" is that his readers should only boast in the cross. Indeed, this is the central argument of this final paragraph, and it reflects the Judaizers' emphasis on circumcision as a way to avoid the offense of the cross and so to preach "another gospel."[31] This does not necessarily mean that Paul's blessing is only for those who agree with his fundamental instruction about the cross as opposed to those who agree with his teaching about the new creation (as if these could be two disparate groups), but it does indicate that the emphasis of Paul's argument is on the cross rather than on the new creation instruction.

"ISRAEL OF GOD" INCLUDES ONLY ETHNIC JEWS

The Israel-as-ethnic-Jews viewpoint also includes three supporting arguments: the syntax of the passage, Paul's usage of "Israel" in his other writings, and the Jewish background of the benediction. I will proceed in the same manner as in the previous section by explaining the argument itself and then following this with a critical assessment by the opponents of the view.

The Syntax of the Paragraph

Two aspects related to syntax, the use of καὶ (used three times in 6:16) and the use of the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ, give support to the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position.

The Use of Καὶ

The first use of καὶ in 6:16 is similar to δέ, providing simple coordination between 6:15 and 6:16. Debate surrounds the next two uses: εἰρήνη ἐπ᾽ αὐτοὺς **καὶ** ἔλεος **καὶ** ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ. This phrase is fraught with difficulty because it has a "double *epi,* double *kai,* and double attributes in the wrong order."[32] Moo's layout of the

[29]Moo, *Galatians,* 399; Longenecker, *Galatians,* 297; Martyn, *Galatians,* 566–67; Schreiner, *Galatians,* 380.

[30]Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation,* 247.

[31]Ibid., 248. Weima, "Hermeneutical Key," 103, agrees: "In all four of the contrasts that Paul sets out in his Galatian letter closing, the cross of Christ is the watershed between the apostle and his opponents. And this focus on the cross in 6:11–18 is but a reflection of the crucial role that Christ's crucifixion plays throughout the Galatian letter." Weima supports this claim with several references (1:4; 2:19, 20, 21; 3:1, 13; 4:5; 5:11, 24).

[32]Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 81. In speaking of the "double

interpretive options is helpful:

1. The two prepositional phrases could express two related, or identical, objects of the dual blessing of "peace" and "mercy." The καί before the last prepositional phrase could then be
   a. epexegetic, in which case "the Israel of God" is identical to "all who follow this rule"—"Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God" (NIV; cf. also NLT); or
   b. conjunctive, in which case "the Israel of God" might be a separate, or overlapping, group with respect to "all who follow this rule—"And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (ESV; see also NAB).
2. The first prepositional phrase could be dependent on εἰρήνη and the second on ἔλεος. In this case the καί before ἔλεος would be conjunctive ("and") and the καί before the final prepositional phrase adverbial ("also"): "May peace come to all those who follow this standard, and mercy [also] to the Israel of God!" (HCSB).[33]

There are several reasons for supporting option 2. First are the problems related to joining "peace" and "mercy": (a) reading them together requires that αὐτούς be related to both its logical antecedent (ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν) and to a postcedent (τὸν Ἰσραήλ τοῦ θεοῦ) from which it is separated by καὶ ἔλεος καὶ ἐπί;[34] (b) reading them together suggests an illogical progression with the effect preceding the cause;[35] and (c) there is good reason for seeing a call for "mercy" as a specifically Jewish prayer.[36] Second, we consider issues related to the third καὶ of the verse: (a) the normal adverbial use of καὶ marks what follows it with special prominence.[37] Thus, the expected gloss would be

attributes in the wrong order," Richardson is pointing back to Burton, *Galatians,* 357–58, who astutely observes, "The order εἰρήνη καί ἔλεος, if both words have reference to one class of persons, is illogical, placing effect first and cause afterwards." Burton then provides many NT examples where the two words are used together, but ἔλεος always precedes εἰρήνη. This is why both Burton and Richardson argue that the two attributes cannot be referring to a single blessing.

[33]Moo, *Galatians,* 400–401.

[34]Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 372.

[35]Burton, *Galatians,* 357. The reverse order may be attributed to other factors, including reliance on Jewish benedictions, but we will consider more on this point under the "Jewish background" section below.

[36]Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 375–76. This point is actually the burden of her entire essay. Also see Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 109.

[37]Kermit Titrud, "The Function of Καὶ in the Greek New Testament and an Application to 2 Peter," in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis,* ed. David Alan Black (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 242–43, states, "The primary function of the adverbial καὶ is to indicate that the following component(s) should be intensified or emphasized, just as a spotlight focuses

either ascensive ("even") or adjunctive ("also"); (b) if Paul intended to take ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ as identical to ἐπ᾽ αὐτοὺς, he could simply have eliminated the καὶ altogether;[38] and (c) the epexegetic usage is the most unlikely of the options, and if other explanations make better sense, they should receive priority in our interpretation.[39] Thus, it appears that the most straightforward translation of the second and third uses of καὶ is to take the second as conjunctive, joining the two prepositional phrases rather than the two attributes of the blessing, and to take the third as adjunctive, yielding this translation: "And as many as will walk in line with this rule, peace be upon them. And mercy be also upon the Israel of God."[40] Those who follow Moo's option 2 generally support the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position because they see two separate blessings for two groups of people in 6:16, one proclaiming peace for all who walk according to this rule and one proclaiming mercy for the Israel of God.[41]

Even though the arguments for the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews are based on the most common usages of καὶ, those who equate the church with "Israel of God" still find several compelling reasons for their view. First, the understood verb "to be" refers to both "peace" and "mercy," so that it is "more likely [than in Lk 3:22 where two different verbs are used] that in Gal. 6:16 the conjunction καὶ links the expressions 'peace…and mercy' than that it introduces a new clause."[42] Second, the supposed uncommon order of "peace and mercy" is not as difficult as some have claimed because Paul should be granted freedom to compose his closing benediction "according to his argument in the epistle."[43] Third, the

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our attention on something." See Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 82.

[38]Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 188; Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 82.

[39]Moo, *Galatians,* 402; Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 188.

[40]This is very close to Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 374, who prefers the ascensive ("even") rather the adjunctive ("also"). Perhaps Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 84, says it best, "It is difficult to get exactly the right sense in English: 'also' is not quite right, but 'even' is too strong."

[41]There are several different viewpoints as to the precise identity of the ethnic Jewish "Israel of God." These include: (1) all Jewish people (Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 119; Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel,"10; Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 387); (2) Jewish Christians (Betz, *Galatians,* 323; Duncan, *Galatians,* 192; Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation,* 251; John F. Walvoord, "Is the Church the Israel of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (Oct–Dec 1944): 413; W. S. Campbell, "Christianity and Judaism: Continuity and Discontinuity," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8 (1984): 57; (3) unbelieving Jews who will come to faith (Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 83; Bruce, *Galatians,* 274–75; Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 193–94); and (4) a combination of (2) and (3) (Burton, *Galatians,* 358).

[42]Köstenberger, "Identity of ΙΣΡΑΗΛ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ," 13.

[43]Ibid., 14.

explicative use of καὶ has gained considerable support from an essay by Kermit Titrud who argues for the principle of maximum redundancy even when it comes to rarer uses of καὶ. He writes, "The correct meaning in individual contexts is usually that which contributes the least new information to the total context."[44] Therefore, if Paul has not been talking about national Israel in the book as a whole and in Galatians 6 in particular, then it makes better sense for him to be equating the church with "Israel" since this adds less new information to the argument.[45] Finally, solving the conundrum of the second and third καὶ in 6:16, still fails to prove the meaning of "Israel of God."[46] Indeed, someone could accept the translation given above[47] and still argue that "Israel of God" is the church.[48]

The Use of the Genitive Τοῦ Θεοῦ

The nature of the genitive case is to place a limitation of some sort on the head noun with which it is used.[49] When Paul uses Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ in Gal 6:16, he is limiting the appellation to Israelites who belong to or who find their origin in God.[50] Therefore, an implication of this genitive usage is that Paul "expects that only a part, *Israēl tou theou,* will be blessed in the way he prays. There is an Israel (of God) within (all) Israel."[51] If someone were to argue that "Israel of God" refers to

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[44]Titrud, "The Function of Καί," 248.

[45]Titrud never mentions Gal 6:16 in his article, though he gives several other NT examples. Nevertheless, many writers refer to his maximum redundancy principle in defense of the Israel-is-the-church position. See Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the 'Israel of God,'" 206; Köstenberger, "Identity of ΙΣΡΑΗΛ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ," 13; Ray, "The Identity of the 'Israel of God,'"107–8; Cowan, "Context Is Everything," 81.

[46]Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians,* New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 310.

[47]See p. 7.

[48]For example, one could use the ascensive καί ("even") with the notion of "especially" and still accurately reflect the semantic field of the English "even." This is how Köstenberger, "Identity of ΙΣΡΑΗΛ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ," 13, and Schreiner, *Galatians,* 382, understand the ascensive καί, yet they both argue that "Israel of God" is the church.

[49]Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics,* 76.

[50]These categories are typically referred to as the "genitive of possession" and the "genitive of source" respectively. For the purposes of the present argument, the precise genitive usage is not debated nor does it bear on the larger point I am seeking to make.

[51]Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 82. The idea of a remnant of believing Jews within the larger ethnic group of Israelites is developed by Paul in Romans 9:6 and 11:1–10. Also, Betz, *Galatians,* 323, writes, "Analogous genitive qualifications are found elsewhere in Galatians, e.g., in terms like 'the church of God' or 'law of Christ'."

the church, however, they would immediately encounter a problem. Who makes up the larger group of "Israel" from which the smaller part "of God" comes? If the Jew-Gentile church is the "Israel of God," then there must also be a larger "Israel" comprised of Jews and Gentiles which is *not* of God.[52] Thus, the Israel-is-the-church view faces the challenge of finding any evidence in Scripture where "Israel" as a whole—hypothetically including both "Israel" of God and "Israel" not of God—includes Gentiles.

There is little discussion of the limiting nature of the genitive and the implications for the meaning of the head noun ("Israel"). While all who embrace the Israel-is-the-true-church view recognize that the genitive construction is limiting "Israel" to those who are believers,[53] they concentrate on the ramifications of the redefinition of the whole phrase, "Israel of God," and then seek to connect this "Pauline innovation" with other places where Paul makes "polemical redefinition[s]."[54] Frankly, a discussion of the meaning of "Israel" when it is not qualified by "of God" is not apparent in any of the literature.

The Meaning of "Israel" in Paul's Letters

Virtually every interpreter acknowledges that Paul uses "Israel" throughout his writings in a consistent manner to refer to ethnic Jews. This is the strongest argument in support of the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position.[55] Leaving aside Gal 6:16 for the moment, Paul consistently uses "Israel" to refer to ethnic Jews (1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 3:7, 13; Rom 9:6 [twice], 27 [twice], 31; 10:1 [some MSS.], 19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26; Phil 3:5).[56] Hence, it would have been very strange for Paul to use

[52]Some have argued that "Israel of God" refers to *all* ethnic Jews, saved and unsaved alike (Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 119; Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," 10; Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 387), due to the fact that God referred to the Israelites as his people in the OT whether or not they were true believers. By arguing this way, "Israel of God" highlights Israel's special position among all other nations so that the function of the genitive is not limiting the head noun, "Israel," but rather the entire phrase ("Israel of God") is limiting which nations belong to God—only Israel. However, I have argued above that Paul has regenerated Israelites in mind as he gives his benediction.

[53]Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1147.

[54]Ibid., 1146–48. Wright suggests that other such "redefinitions" are found with "Jew" in Rom 2:29, "circumcision" in Phil 3:3, temple language in 2 Cor 6:16, and "law of Christ" in Gal 6:2. He also hints that Paul implies an "Israel according to the Spirit" as a counterpart to "Israel according to the flesh" in 1 Cor 10:18 even though Paul never explicitly uses the phrase.

[55]Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16," 127; Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 190.

[56]Burton, *Galatians,* 358: "There is, in fact, no instance of [Paul] using Ἰσραήλ except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof"; Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation,* 250: "Paul does not use Ἰσραὴλ in his letters unless he is referring to the Jewish people or some constituent part thereof"; Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People,* 176, "Thus, although Paul thought of the members of the church as heirs of the

"Israel" differently than he did everywhere else in his canonical letters.[57]

Supporters of the Israel-as-the-church view generally provide three arguments to answer the "overwhelming"[58] evidence of Paul's usual usage. First, there is some debate about the meaning of "Israel" in Rom 9:6 and 11:26,[59] and furthermore, 1 Cor 10:18 opens the door to an "Israel according to the Spirit."[60] So the evidence is not quite as unanimous as advertised. Second, when Paul wrote Galatians, he had not yet written any of the letters where he used "Israel" to speak of ethnic Jews so his readers would have interpreted the term in light of the way Paul had been speaking of both Jews and Gentiles in Galatians itself (e.g. "seed of Abraham," "heirs of the promise," etc.).[61] Third, there was no precedent in Jewish literature for seeing Israel as referring to a group other than ethnic Jews, because before Paul "nobody had imagined what it might mean for the people of God if the Messiah appeared *and was crucified.* Unprecedented situations generate unprecedented results."[62]

The Jewish Background of the Benediction

Ever since Burton questioned why Paul would have placed "peace" before "mercy" in his benediction,[63] scholars have sought to find some

promises to Israel, he did not (with one exception) give them the name."

There is little debate about any of these texts and their reference to ethnic Jews. Most interesting among them, because it is parallel to the use in Gal 6:16, is Paul's usage in Rom 9:6 where he distinguishes between ethnic Jews as a whole and ethnic Jewish believers ("not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel," ESV). That Paul is distinguishing between these two groups is made clear in 9:7 when he says, "and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring."

[57]Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 1–3, provides a strong argument from the history of interpretation regarding Paul's use of "Israel." The first sentence of his book states, "The word 'Israel' is applied to the Christian Church for the first time by Justin Martyr *c.* A.D. 160." It seems clear that the early interpreters of Galatians did not apply Paul's "Israel of God" to the church because they did not have a category for such a usage.

[58]Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 189.

[59]Schreiner, *Galatians,* 382.

[60]Moo, *Galatians,* 402–3.

[61]Martyn, *Galatians,* 575; Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16," 127. However, this argument loses a bit of steam when considering that Paul never chose to use "Israel" to speak of both Jews and Gentiles anywhere else in his letters. Once he had established an Israel-as-the-church position in his first letter, why would he not have used it in similar ways later? Whether one holds to an early or later dating of Galatians, most believe Paul wrote it before 1 Corinthians, Romans, or Philippians, which are the only other epistles where Paul used Ἰσραὴλ.

[62]Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1146.

[63]Burton, *Galatians,* 357, called the order "illogical." Furthermore, Betz, *Galatians,* 321, shows that the other blessings of Paul do not share any similarities to that found in Gal 6:16. See Rom 15:33; 16:20; 1 Cor 16:23f; 2 Cor 13:11, 13; Phil 4:7, 9, 23; 1 Thess 5:23, 28; Philemon 25; Eph 6:23f; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:16, 18; 1 Tim

parallel in the OT, the LXX, and 2nd temple Jewish literature where such a word order could be found. Unfortunately, they have unearthed very scant evidence. The best suggestion to date is that of Peter Richardson who argues that Paul was dependent upon the 19th benediction (the Birkat ha-Shalom ["Blessing of Peace"]) of the *Shemoneh Esreh* (Babylonian Recension),[64] which reads, "Bestow peace, happiness, and blessing, grace, loving-kindness, and mercy upon us and upon all Israel, your people." Besides the word order, proponents of the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position point to the fact that this is a *Jewish* prayer and that it is given with particular reference to ethnic Israel.[65] Furthermore, Paul's use of "mercy" has special reference to Israel as a nation.[66]

While reliance on a Jewish benediction is an interesting proposal, even Eastman who holds to the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position admits that "dependence on such a source [the *Shemoneh Esreh*] is very difficult, if not impossible to prove."[67] Scholars have noted several problems with this argument. First, the blessing argues from the smaller group ("us" in the synagogue) to the larger group ("your people"—all Israel); so it seems that Paul is seeking to bless those in the Galatian churches who follow his rule (the smaller group) and then expanding the blessing to all the people of God—both Jews and non-Jews (the larger group).[68] Second, Beale states that the dating of the Jewish prayer is too uncertain to suggest that it would have come to Paul's or the Galatians' minds; in fact the prayer probably did not reach its final form until A.D. 70–100.[69] Finally, the connection of "mercy" with "Israel" does

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6:13; 2 Tim 4:22; Titus 3:15.

[64]Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 79–80; Betz, *Galatians,* 321–22; Longenecker, *Galatians,* 298. The Palestinian recension is a bit shorter and omits "mercy." Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 118–19, has suggested 1 Enoch 1:8 and the Kaddish de Rabbanen (a Jewish prayer) as possibilities, though his greatest concern is not so much with Paul's word order as it is with the emphasis of "mercy" being expressed for corporate Israel.

[65]Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 119; Dunn, *Galatians,* 344, states, "Paul has deliberately introduced a strongly Jewish benediction, whose very Jewish character would be unmistakable to all the Christian Jews in Galatia and to those most influenced by them."

[66]Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 394–95, argues that Paul specifically uses such calls for God's "mercy" to rest upon unbelieving Israel as an ethnic group.

[67]Ibid, 374.

[68]Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16," 126; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1149. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 81, answers this objection by arguing that Paul is using irony so that the blessing goes from the larger to the smaller group, with the "Israel of God" representing only saved Jews.

[69]Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God," 208. But see Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God,* 1149, "The dating of the Eighteen Benedictions is not important for our purposes; I assume that such formalized prayers from later generations grew out of long-standing traditions going way back into the second-Temple period."

not require an ethnic identification for "Israel" since mercy is available for all people.[70]

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Having looked at the strongest arguments supporting both viewpoints on the question of the identity of "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16, let me summarize. I begin by reviewing the Israel-is-the-church view. First, the claim that Paul's argument in Galatians as a whole pushes the reader toward understanding Israel to include both Jews and Gentiles certainly holds weight because Paul has not discussed the status or future of Israel at all in the book and because his emphasis has been on the unity of believers in the one body (Gal 3:28). Second, the argument of the last paragraph (6:11–17) points to a conclusion of theological ideas already discussed earlier in the book so that Paul can easily move from appellations like "seed of Abraham" and "children of the promise like Isaac" to "Israel of God," using all of these ideas to refer to Jews and non-Jews in the church.

The third argument—that Paul's benediction derives its main force from a reading of new creation themes in Isaiah 54:10—is not quite as strong as the first two arguments. This is true because of the lack of contextual support in Gal 6 and also because of the connection of "this rule" to boasting in the cross rather than "new creation."

Turning to arguments in support of Israel as ethnic Jews, I first discussed two syntactical points that stand out: (1) the third use of καὶ in 6:16 is best understood with an adjunctive meaning ("also") because the second καὶ connects the two prepositional phrases of the verse resulting in a distinction between "all who walk according to this rule" and "Israel of God." This conclusion rests upon the most normal use of καὶ in each of its three occurrences in the verse. Yet the meaning of "Israel of God" is not determined by this conclusion, for the adjunctive meaning could simply be renaming "all…rule" as also the "Israel of God," delineating a smaller group ("Israel of God") from within the larger group ("all…rule"), or introducing an entirely new group so that the two groups are distinct.

(2) The second syntactical point relates to the use of the genitive and argues that the limiting nature of the genitive requires a larger group of which the smaller group is a part. This reality certainly supports the idea of a spiritual ethnic Israel within the larger ethnic Israel that consists of both saved and unsaved Jews. It is impossible to find any evidence of the term "Israel" being used in Scripture of both Jews and Gentiles as a whole. Grammar does not prove that "Israel of God" must refer to spiritual ethnic Israel, but it certainly places a heavy burden upon any who would seek to identify an Israel-not-of-God with all

[70]Filtvedt, "'God's Israel' in Galatians 6.16," 127. He also indicates that Eastman's argument relies too heavily upon Romans 9–11 which was written after Galatians.

Jews and Gentiles, i.e., all humanity.

Perhaps the strongest argument is the second: Paul consistently uses "Israel" throughout his letters to refer to ethnic Jews. This is particularly true when he uses "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16. This usage parallels that of Rom 9:6 in which a larger group of all ethnic Jews ("Israel") is distinguished from a smaller group of believing Jews ("Israel"). Furthermore, if Paul did use "Israel of God" to refer to the church in his first letter, why would he not have used it similarly in the twelve canonical letters he wrote afterwards? It would appear that the Galatians-specific contextual argument—especially when nuanced by the very real evidence of Jewish sympathies in Galatians—does not outweigh the consistent usage of "Israel" as referring to ethnic Jews *every* time Paul uses the term in his writings.[71]

The third argument used in support of the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position relates to Paul's usage of a Jewish benediction. This idea suffers from the same type of speculative problems faced by the "new creation" argument of the Israel-is-the-church view. While slightly more plausible, I do not think this argument is compelling enough to overshadow its counterpoint.

In the end, the syntactical arguments point toward the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position with the normal use of καὶ establishing a good foundation for this viewpoint and the use of the genitive providing solid evidence for a connection between Paul's usage of "Israel" in Rom 9:6 and his use of "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16, because the limiting function of the genitive requires a larger group (all ethnic Jews) from which the smaller group ("Israel of God") is distinguished. This leads to the strongest argument for the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews position: the consistent use of "Israel" as referring to ethnic Jews throughout Paul's writings. Though Gal 6:16 is likely his first usage of the term in his canonical letters, the evidence of his concern for his Jewish compatriots in the letter and in the early church as a whole provides ample justification for why Paul would feel compelled to give a special benediction for the Jewish members of the Galatian churches. Indeed, this emphasis

[71]While I will conclude that "Israel of God" refers to ethnic believing Jews, an "Israel" within "Israel" (as Paul uses these terms in Rom 9:6), I want to review the various positions scholars hold under the Israel-as-ethnic-Jews umbrella (see n. 41). Generally, three views exist: (1) unbelieving Israel (Eastman, "Israel and the Mercy of God," 394, Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," 10, Bachmann, *Anti-Judaism in Galatians?* 123); (2) Jewish believers (Betz, *Galatians*; 323; Burton, *Galatians,* 358; Hubing, *Crucifixion and New Creation,* 251; Duncan, *Galatians,* 192); (3) Jewish believers who will eventually come to Christ in the future (Bruce, *Galatians,* 275; Johnson, "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 194, Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church,* 82). There is some overlap between the second and third group in that the second group generally argues that there are those within the "Israel of God" who are "potential" but not yet true believers who will eventually come to Christ (see Hubing). The first view stumbles over the fact that the "Israel of God" must include those who are distinct from Israelites who are not "of God." Finally, those holding to views two or three would agree that Rom 11:26, which speaks of "all Israel" being saved in the future, would certainly include the "Israel of God" in Gal 6:16.

upon the Jewish believers in the infant church foreshadows the more lengthy treatment Paul would eventually provide in his letter to the Romans. So rather than including Gentiles under the umbrella term, "Israel," Paul instead speaks to his love and concern for the "Israel of God," i.e., the Jewish believers of the Galatian churches.[72]

[72]I would likewise assert that by extension Jewish believers of any church as well as Jews who will be saved (Rom 11:26) ought to be included in this phrase.