

Who is the Israel of God?

“And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16).

At the end of the New Testament book of Galatians, the Apostle Paul offers a benediction of "peace and mercy" upon "the Israel of God."

Who is *the Israel of God*?

The entire New Testament teaches us that the Israel of God refers to all Christian believers. Let us take a look at just a few of the many passages that teach this, focusing primarily on Paul's teachings from Galatians.

In Romans, Paul taught that the Israel of God is spiritual. The old covenant rites like circumcision had a spiritual meaning, which was fulfilled in Christ:

“For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God” (Romans 2:28-29).

In Romans, chapter 11, Paul uses the Old Testament image of an olive tree to teach that the old covenant assembly of God's people, Israel, has been remade into the Church of Jesus Christ. Many Jews were broken off, the Gentiles were grafted in, and many Jews will yet be grafted back in to the one olive tree, the one people of God, which is now the Church of Jesus Christ, the Israel of God.

But someone may object, “When I read the Old Testament, I don't see Israel as including all Christians.” Paul acknowledges that this was not so clear prior to the advent of Christ. It was “the mystery of Christ” (Ephesians 3:4). What is the mystery of Christ? It is that Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs to the promise that God made to Abraham, of the same body (the Church), and partakers of God's promise in Christ through the gospel:

“by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:4-6).

There is only one Church, Jew and Gentile. In Christ Jesus, there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). In Ephesians 2:14-16, Paul adds, “For He [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, *that is*, the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man *from* the two, *thus* making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

As Saul of Tarsus, Paul was an ethnic Jew, “circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, *of* the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee” (Philippians 3:5). But remember that he was “an apostle to the Gentiles” (Romans 11:13; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11). In light of his teachings that Christ has made Jew and Gentile *one* in Christ, it seems clear that Paul’s concluding words to the churches of Galatia in modern-day Turkey are a blessing upon the entire Church as God’s Israel, the seed promised to Abraham (Gal. 3:29).

Likewise the Apostle Peter taught that the Church is the Israel of God, as he applies Old Testament terms for Israel to the Church and emphasizes that the Gentiles are now included in the holy nation of God, the Israel of God:

“But you *are* a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once *were* not a people but *are* now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy” (1 Peter 2:9-10).

When we look at the context of Galatians 6:16 and of the entire book of Galatians, it is readily apparent that the Israel of God must refer to all true believers, both Jew and Gentile.

In Galatians chapter 1, Paul testified of his own Jewish pedigree, as a persecutor of the church of God (1:13), advancing in Judaism and being exceedingly zealous for the traditions of Judaism (1:14).

In chapter 2, Paul explains that he refused circumcision for Titus due to the Judaizer heresy (2:3). The false brethren known as Judaizers were trying to take away Christian liberty by forcing Christians to adopt circumcision and old covenant practices that were fulfilled in Christ (2:4-5).

In chapter 3, Paul taught that justification is and always has been by faith alone (3:1-9). “Only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham” (3:7). The Scripture “preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand” (3:8). No one is justified by the law in the sight of God (3:11-12). The blessing of Abraham has come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus (3:14). The law was only a tutor “to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (2:24). But now the old covenant (Mosaic) ceremonial law is abolished, for “after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (3:24-25).

There is no longer any distinction spiritually between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) (3:28). Anyone who belongs to Christ, any Christian, is “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise (3:29).

In chapter 4, the Apostle Paul compares the old covenant era to a child under guardians who is heir to a throne and yet is like a slave because he is still under guardianship until the age of majority or age of adulthood. Yet, everything changed with Christ’s advent.

When “the fullness of the time had come,” our Redeemer came to make us sons and heirs of God (4:1-6).

And yet the Galatians were denying the Gospel of Christ by their actions, by their submission to the legalism of the Judaizers. They were returning to “the weak and beggarly elements, to which they desired again to be in bondage” (4:8-9). They were observing the old covenant holy days, months, seasons, and years, which were all abolished after Christ’s coming (4:10). Paul feared that his labors had been in vain (4:11, 20).

The Judaizers were courting the Galatians to make them faithful disciples to their legalistic system that contradicted the freedom of the Gospel (4:17-18).

Paul compares the Judaizers to Ishmael, the son of Hagar, the slave woman. They are seeking to keep the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works, without understanding its true meaning that leads to salvation in Christ. Like the city of Jerusalem, they were in bondage to an earthly, Pharisaical religion.

Yet, the true Israel of God is typified by Sara, the free woman and her son Isaac, who is the child of promise. (Isaac, of course, was the father of Israel.) Paul compares all Christians to Isaac and teaches that we are all “children of promise” (4:28). As Ishmael persecuted Isaac, so we are persecuted by the world and its false religions (4:29).

The Church is the Jerusalem above (4:26), the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb 12:22), the New Jerusalem (Rev. 3:12; 21:2), “the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). It is “a better, that is, a heavenly country” (Heb. 11:16). And all Christians’ citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20). This Jerusalem is a city of freedom, typified by Sara, the free woman. And so the Church is to be marked by Christian liberty.

In Galatians, chapter 5, Paul exhorts the Church, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. Indeed I, Paul, say to you that if you become circumcised, Christ will profit you nothing” (Gal. 5:1-2).

For Christians, whether ethnically Jewish or Gentile, there is no return to Judaism. There is no return to circumcision, the Passover, ceremonial worship, old covenant religious holidays, or Jewish dietary laws. To impose these on the Church of Christ is a denial of Christ and of the “liberty by which Christ has made us free.”

Paul warns that those who seek to keep “the works of the law” have “become estranged from Christ” and “fallen from grace” (5:4). “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love” (5:6).

The Judaizers were mandating circumcision and other “works of the law” as a prerequisite for salvation. This was heresy. Additionally, circumcision was no longer binding as a religious rite on Christian believers.

The Judaizers promoted a hybrid religion of Pharisaical Judaism and Christianity. Yet, Paul willingly accepted persecution for his refusal to “preach circumcision” and adherence to the old covenant rites which were now a denial of the Gospel.

In Galatians, chapter 6, Paul repeats again that the Judaizers are compelling the Gentiles to be circumcised so that they can boast in this outward ritual and in their flesh, “only that they may not suffer persecution for the cross of Christ” (6:12-13).

The Apostle Paul only boasted in “the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14). The born-again Paul had no interest in the world and its manmade religions (6:14; 4:8-9).

In Colossians 2:8, Paul warned, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Secular humanism, humanistic philosophy, and all manmade religions are oppressive and deceitful. Only Christ brings true freedom.

“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17). ““Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:36).

Having once been a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5), Paul now abhorred the idea of submitting to the traditions of men, legalism, and worship contrived according to man’s will (will worship or self-invented worship). He preached a Gospel of freedom from the doctrines and commandments of men. He preached a Gospel of Christian liberty.

In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul adds, “Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as *though* living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations -- “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,” which all concern things which perish with the using -- according to the commandments and doctrines of men? These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, *false* humility, and neglect of the body, *but are* of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.”

Jesus had this to say about the manmade religion of Pharisaical Judaism: “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with *their* lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8-9). ““For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men -- the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” He said to them, “*All too* well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition.”” (Mark 7:8-9).

Finally, in Galatians 6:15-16, we read: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy *be* upon them, and upon the Israel of God.”

So who is the Israel of God according to the New Testament? Does this refer to ethnic Jews in the modern nation of Israel or in Jerusalem in Paul’s day right before its destruction by the Romans in AD 70? Does it refer to ethnic Jews throughout the world or ethnic Jews who profess to be Christian?

No, the Apostle Paul, speaking the Word of God, told us that this designation no longer has anything to do with circumcision or one’s ethnicity or keeping old covenant Jewish rituals. Rather, “in Christ Jesus” what matters is “a new creation.” What matters is that you are a new creature, born again and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”

Romans 4:16: “Therefore *it is* of faith that *it might be* according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.”

We, like the Galatian Christians, are children of promise like Isaac and Jacob (Israel). We are the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham and Sara, children of the Jerusalem above, members of a heavenly kingdom (Eph. 2:6; Phil. 3:20). We are the Israel of God.

Now that “the blessing of Abraham” has “come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus,” all those who have true faith in Christ Jesus, all those who are born again are a new creation and the Israel of God!