

Part 3 Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program?

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The Argument from Galatians 6:15-16

While amillenarians often use the argument that it is not necessary for Israel to be explicitly identified with the church just as it is not necessary for the doctrine of the Trinity to be supported by the word *Trinity* in the Bible, many of them point to Galatians 6:15–16 as the one explicit reference. Accordingly it bears careful scrutiny.

Paul in Galatians is attempting to deal with the question of grace versus law, both as a way of salvation and as a way of sanctification. He concludes in Galatians 6:15, “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.” He then says in verse 16, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” The question raised by this passage is whether the expression “the Israel of God” is identical to the “new creation” described earlier in the verse, applying to the entire church.

Appeal is made to the fact that the Greek preposition *καί* is sometimes used in an explicative sense and is equivalent to *namely*. Or it could be used in an ascensive sense and translated *even*. But the normal meaning of *καί* is that of a simple connective as indicated by the translation “and.” Burton has a complete discussion on this matter.

Though Rom 9⁶ 1 Cor 10¹⁸ show that Paul distinguished between Israel according to the flesh and the Israel according to election or promise, and Rom 2²⁹ Phil 3³ suggest that he might use τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ of all believers in Christ, regardless of nationality, there is, in fact, no instance of his using Ἰσραὴλ except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof. These facts favour the interpretation of the expression as applying not to the Christian community, but to Jews; yet, in view of τοῦ θεοῦ, not to the whole Jewish nation, but to the pious Israel, the remnant according to the election of grace (Rom 11⁵), including even those who had not seen the truth as Paul saw it. . . . In view of the apostle's previous strong anti-judaistic expressions, he feels impelled, by the insertion of *καί*, to emphasise this expression of his true attitude towards his people. It can scarcely be translated into English without overtranslating.

The burden of proof is on the expositor to show that the word is used in the sense of “namely” or “even.” Such proof is completely lacking. It is significant that Arndt and Gingrich avoid listing Galatians 6:16 in their study of unusual uses of *καί*. Robertson has no reference to it in either his *Grammar* or his *Word Pictures*. It is also interesting that commentators who do not have a particular burden to prove that Israel is the church usually do not comment on the problem.

Under the circumstances the simplest explanation is the best, that is, that what Paul is saying is that those who walk by the rule of grace as a new creation in Christ are worthy recipients of His benediction of peace and mercy, but that from his standpoint this is especially true of the Israel of God, by which Paul means Israelites who in the church age trust Jesus Christ. This is a

natural and biblical explanation. In any case this verse is not an explicit statement that the Israel of God equals the church composed of both Jews and Gentiles. If those who contend for this point of view had a better verse, they obviously would not use this text. Allis, for instance, merely cites it as a proof text without discussion.

The Argument from Romans 9-11

As previously pointed out, leading amillenarians and postmillenarians are included with those who deny that New Testament references to Israel are always equivalent to the church. However, both premillenarians and amillenarians who want to find fulfillment of Israel's prophecy in the church appeal to Romans 9–11 .

Ladd, for instance, devotes a whole chapter to the subject "What about Israel?" in his attempt to identify Israel as the church. His argument centers on the treatment by Paul of the relationship of Israel to the church in Romans 9–11 . After stating the special character of Israel's relationship to God in Romans 9:4–5, Paul proceeds in verses 6–8 to distinguish between the physical seed and the spiritual seed. "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: 'Through Isaac your descendants will be named.' That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants."

Everyone agrees that those who are physical descendants of Abraham are not assured individual salvation or spiritual blessing. Not all of Abraham's physical descendants inherit the promises given to Jacob. Likewise neither can all the descendants of Jacob presume on their natural lineage.

What Paul is distinguishing here is spiritual Israel or true Israel from Israelites who have only a physical connection. On this point all can agree. But there is no reference in this verse to Gentiles. While it is true according to Galatians 3:6–9 that Gentile Christians are spiritually descendants of Abraham, they are never called descendants of Jacob, and this is the point at issue.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament agree that all the descendants of Abraham do not participate in the particular promises given to Israel. It is also true that all physical Israel will not inherit the promises, but only spiritual Israel. To expand this, however, to the statement that spiritual Israel includes Gentiles is to assume what is never taught in Scripture. The fact is that all through Romans 9–11 the thought depends on a careful distinction between Gentiles and Israel. In the past, Israel had many advantages over the Gentiles. In the present age they have the opportunity to receive Christ on an equal basis with Gentiles. In the future, they will be restored to a privileged position, as is brought out in chapter 11 .

Ladd, however, argues from Romans 9:23–26 that the quotation from Hosea applies to the Gentiles a prophecy originally given to Israel. The passage is as follows, "And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, 'I will call those who were not My people, "My people," and her who was not beloved, "beloved." And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my

people," there they shall be called sons of the living God.'" Ladd states, "Then Paul does an amazing thing. He quotes two passages from Hosea which in their Old Testament context refer to

Israel and applies them to the Christian church which consists largely of Gentiles, and he does this to prove that the Old Testament foresees the Gentile church.”

Ladd here is guilty of reading into the passage what it does not say. It is clear all the way through Romans 9 that the vessels of mercy mentioned in verse 23 include both Jews and Gentiles, and in verse 24 he specifically mentions both classes. However, in verses 25–29 the Apostle reverts back to the marvelous fact that Jews can be saved in this present age, and in his quotation from Hosea he claims that there is partial fulfillment in the present age because the people of Israel can be restored and become sons of the living God. The fact that Paul is talking about Israel and not Gentiles is demonstrated in verses 27–29 where he quotes from Isaiah beginning with, “And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel....” It is not until verse 30 that he returns to consider the Gentiles and this is introduced by the question, “What shall we say then?” In other words Ladd’s assertion that Hosea is referring to Gentiles is not supported by the context. In this entire chapter Paul is talking about Israel in contrast to the Gentiles.

It could be argued that there is a partial application of the Hosea prophecy to Gentiles because they were not the people of God but now in the present age can become sons of the living God. However, the entire Old Testament including the Book of Hosea points out that Israel in covenant relationship with God forsook that covenant and has to be restored—and this was never true of the Gentiles. Accordingly Ladd’s decision to adopt a spiritualizing hermeneutic because he “*finds the New Testament applying to the spiritual church promises which in the Old Testament refer to literal Israel*” is not really justified by the quotation from Hosea. Ladd is reading into it what he wants it to say rather than what it actually says. Even Ladd agrees that in chapter 11 Paul returns to literal Israel. The fact, however, is that Paul is dealing with literal Israel all the way through these chapters.

The metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11 has occasioned a great deal of exegesis, usually influenced heavily by what the interpreter wants the passage to say. The olive tree has its natural branches cut off in order that branches from the wild olive tree could be grafted in. Paul then predicts that the day will come when the wild olive branches will be cut off and the natural branches grafted back in. The question is, What does the olive tree represent?

The most natural interpretation is that it represents the place of blessing as defined in the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:3, which predicted that in Abraham all nations will be blessed. Israel was blessed by its relationship to Abraham as illustrated in the Old Testament where the Israelites were a favored people. Their rejection of Christ, however, has brought about a judicial blinding or hardening as mentioned in Romans 11:25, which states that “a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in.” This refers to the difficulty in the present age for Jews to see the truth concerning Christ. In the present age Gentiles are especially blessed, but Israel is largely in unbelief.

The passage indicates that Israel’s blindness originated when Christ was on earth and will end when the time of Gentile blessing concludes with the rapture of the church. After the period of the Gentile blessing, Israel will have a further period of special blessing when “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26).

In this passage, as in earlier passages in Romans, there is no need to confuse Israel with the church. In fact the contrast between Israel and Gentiles continues to be observed. While Paul makes clear that Israelites can be saved in the present age, it is also clear that it is a period of unusual blessing for the Gentiles, in contrast to what precedes and what follows. That Israelites and Gentiles share blessing in the church in the present age all will affirm. However, the passage

does not teach that Gentiles become Israelites. In fact Paul's entire argument is based on the *contrast* between Israel and the Gentiles in the period preceding the present age and in the period following the present age.

Much has been written on the phrase "all Israel will be saved." Here Hodge, although a postmillenarian, makes the text clear.

Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation. The Jews, as a people, are now rejected; as a people they are to be restored. As their rejection, although national, did not include the rejection of every individual; so their restoration, although in like manner national, need not be assumed to include the salvation of every individual Jew. Πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ is not therefore to be here understood to mean, all the true people of God, as Augustin[e], Calvin, and many others explain; nor all the elect Jews, i.e., all that part of the nation which constitute "the remnant according to election of grace;" but the whole nation as a nation.

As in previous references to Israel and the Gentiles in Romans 9–11, Israel remains Israel and Gentiles remain Gentiles and neither term is in itself equivalent to the church.

The Argument from Philippians 3:1-3

In the Old Testament the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision and anyone not circumcised was considered cut off from the covenant. "The circumcised" referred therefore to those Jews who claimed their right to the promises given to Abraham and the Jewish nation by observing this rite of circumcision. By contrast, Gentiles are called uncircumcised. Those who want to make Israel and the church identical have very often referred to Philippians 3:1–3 as contradictory evidence. The passage states, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision; for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh."

When Paul says "we are the true circumcision," he is of course referring to himself and fellow Jews. The word true is not in the Greek text but is added by way of explanation by the translators. While Jews were to be physically circumcised, Paul teaches that Gentiles can fulfill the same idea by being set apart to God without the physical act. Here those ambitious to prove that Israel is the church arbitrarily state that verse 3 is referring to Gentiles, something the passage does not indicate. While it may be conceded that Gentile Christians who are separated to God fulfill the concept of circumcision, even this concept distinguishes Gentile Christians from Christians who are of the nation Israel. Paul further points out that physical circumcision even for a Jew is not enough, and in Romans 2:28–29 he states, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." Accordingly while Gentiles may achieve spiritually what a spiritual Jew achieves, it is not by the physical act of circumcision. Instead of making Jew and Gentile one, Philippians 3:3 continues the distinction even though they are one in Christ.

Other passages are often cited but are just as arbitrary in their interpretation as those previously examined. In James 1:1

reference is made to the twelve tribes scattered abroad, and 1 Peter 1:1 refers to the sojourners. It is perfectly natural to take both passages as referring to Jewish Christians, not Gentiles, and to

read in them anything more is imposing on the texts what they do not say. More important, however, is the argument related to Hebrews 8.

The Argument concerning the New Covenant in Hebrews 8

From the very fact that the Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament, or the Old covenant and the New covenant, it is clear that Christianity fundamentally is based on a New covenant brought in by Jesus Christ. While the history of Christianity has revealed many attempts to return to the Law as illustrated in Paul's dealing with the Galatians, and while other groups like the Seventh-day Adventists go back to the Law for some of their basic theology, the whole point of the New Testament is to present the grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ. John states it very simply, "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

It was exceedingly difficult for many Hebrew Christians to accept the fact that the Law was actually finished and that a new covenant had been introduced. Accordingly the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews offered several contrasts between the New covenant and the old covenant in relation to salvation, the priesthood, and God's promises. One such contrast is developed in Hebrews 8:7–13 where the author presents an extended quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34. Exponents of the idea that the church fulfills Israel's promises put heavy emphasis on this passage as proving their contention.

It is true that the entire passage from Jeremiah is quoted. The interpretation of the passage in Hebrews 8:13 is limited, however, to one phrase, "a new covenant," and the interpretation given is that "He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear." Exponents of the idea that Israel is the church are quick to point to this passage as proof of their contention. Allis, for instance, states:

The passage speaks of the new covenant. It declares that this new covenant has been already introduced and that by virtue of the fact that it is called "new" it has made the one which it is replacing "old"

and the old is about to vanish away. It would be hard to find a clearer reference to the gospel age in the Old Testament than in these verses in Jeremiah; and the writer of Hebrews obviously appeals to it as such.

But is Jeremiah's New covenant actually being fulfilled today?

Scholars in all classifications have struggled to understand completely the concept of the New covenant. Even among premillenarians, several different views have been advanced: (a) the New covenant belongs only to Israel but the blood of the covenant is applied to the church; (b) the New covenant is expressly Israel's covenant but is applied in general to the church; or (c) there are two New covenants—one for Israel and one for the church. Those who affirm that Israel and the church are one interpret the covenant as expressly made to the church, including both Old Testament and New Testament saints.

Some of the problems are semantic, and the various views are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The problem with claiming explicit fulfillment of the promises in the New covenant for the present age is the simple fact that all the promises of the New covenant are not being currently fulfilled. While the church has experienced many spiritual blessings, it is not true (as is clear from Heb 8:11) that evangelism and missionary activity are no longer necessary because everyone knows the Lord. The world has not yet reached the stage where God has declared, "I

will remember their sins no more.” A literal fulfillment of this passage requires the millennial kingdom with Christ reigning and bringing in the spiritual blessings that attend His reign.

A further problem for those who use this passage to support the concept that Israel and the church are one is that the explanation or exegesis limits itself to the one word *new*. The writer of Hebrews does not claim that the New covenant is now being fulfilled. All he claims is that a New covenant has been established. What is the true explanation?

The fact that all conservative expositors accept is that Christ, through his death on the Cross, has established a covenant of grace under which those who are sinners can be justified, forgiven, and made new creatures in Christ. This is new because it provides something the Law did not provide. A solution to the thorny problem of the interpretation of the New covenant is relatively simple.

Christ in His death on the Cross made it possible for God to extend grace to anyone who believes, whether Jew or Gentile.

This attitude of grace, based on the death of Christ, is stated in Romans 3:23–26. It is also the basis of grace to the church in the present age and is the legal background for salvation, justification, and all the blessings that belong to the church. The grace accomplished by Christ is also the basis for millennial blessing and the fulfillment of the many promises of an age in which there will be righteousness and peace and universal knowledge of the Lord. A solution to the problem then is that there is one covenant with application to Israel and to the church and to anyone saved by the death of Christ. In Scripture the application of the New covenant is explicitly to the church in the present age and to Israel as a nation in the future as far as millennial blessings are concerned. The New covenant is also the basis for a new rule of life according to the dispensational setting of those involved.

Accordingly the writer of Hebrews is proving that the Law is dead because even the Old Testament predicted that a New covenant would replace the Law, and a faithful Jew should recognize that the Mosaic law was temporary and would be supplanted by a New covenant of grace. Such a New covenant has already been brought in by the death and resurrection of Christ. That the application to Israel is full and complete as anticipated in Jeremiah 31 and other similar passages, however, is not stated in the text nor is it actually true. Accordingly the proof that Israel and the church are identical is not supported by this passage. What is taught is that both Israel and the church derive their salvation and spiritual blessing from the same covenant, that is, the covenant of grace made possible by the death of Christ.

Conclusion

Dispensational interpretation holds that the term *Israel* is never inclusive of Gentile Christians and that while both enjoy the same privileges in the church in the present age, the fulfillment of the special promise given to Israel of a golden age of grace and blessing is yet to be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. This is based on a literal interpretation of prophecy.

In taking all references to Israel literally, dispensationalists have the support of such a postmillenarian as Hodge. Accordingly it is not simply dispensational theology that dictates that Israel always means Israel. Correct exegesis also supports the same concept. The fact that so many scholars have spiritualized the

Scriptures, including those relating to Israel, is of course evident. Amillennialism, which often takes this view, has been predominant since the days of Augustine. But the concept that the term

Israel includes Gentile believers is read into the text of Scripture. It is determined by theological presuppositions rather than proper exegesis.

The implication that Israel always means Israel is important because it supports not only premillennialism, but the whole concept of the literal interpretation of prophecy in general. It leads to the conclusion that God has a special program for the nation of Israel as a nation. In the present age Jew and Gentile can become one in Christ without losing their racial or national characteristics. In the future the distinction between Jew and Gentile will again become more distinct as Israel receives special blessings promised to her in the millennial kingdom while the Gentiles receive other blessings during the same time period. Even in the new heavens and the new earth the ethnic distinctions continue though all believers share the same blessings. The new Jerusalem will have the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates; and the names of the twelve Apostles, representing the church, will be on the foundation. Individual and corporate identity will be preserved throughout eternity, even though the blessings of grace may be shared equally in the eternal state. The answer to the question, "Is Israel's prophetic program fulfilled by the New Testament church?" is no. Israel still has a glorious future which will be fulfilled literally. Wilkinson has expressed this clearly.

Nevertheless, facts are stubborn things. It is a fact that God has declared that Israel is not to cease from being a nation before Him for ever. It is a fact that the Jewish nation, still in unbelief, survivor of all others, alone retains its national identity.... It is a fact that the promise of a land (the territorial limits of which were defined) to the posterity of Abraham, as also the promise of a son of David's own line to occupy David's throne for ever, were *unconditional* promises, ratified by covenant and oath. It is a fact that the posterity of Abraham has never yet fully possessed and enjoyed the whole land so granted and that no son of David occupies David's throne.... The O.T. promises are all as certain of fulfilment in their O.T. sense and meaning and purpose to Israel, as are the N.T. promises certain of fulfilment to the Church.