

PAUL AND “THE ISRAEL OF GOD”: AN EXEGETICAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL CASE-STUDY

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*

Persistent efforts to explain “the Israel of God” in Gal 6:16 as a reference to the church defy overwhelming grammatical, exegetical, and theological evidence that the expression refers to ethnic Israel. Among contemporary interpreters, three views of the phrase’s meaning emerge: (1) “The Israel of God” is the church; (2) “The Israel of God” is the remnant of Israelites in the church; and (3) “The Israel of God” is the future redeemed nation. View 1 suffers from the grammatical and syntactical weakness of endorsing the meaning of the Greek particle kai as “namely,” a rare usage of that word. Exegetically, View 1 is also weak in choosing to define “Israel” as the church, a usage that appears nowhere else in biblical literature. View 1 also is lacking theologically because the name “Israel” is not applied to the church at any time in history until A.D. 160. Views 2 and 3 coincide grammatically and syntactically, exegetically, and theologically in positive support for those views by taking kai in its frequent continuative or copulative sense and by understanding “Israel” as a reference to ethnic Israel. View 3 shows its exegetical superiority to View 2 through the six points of Peter Richardson, which develop the ethnic nature of “Israel,” and by recalling Paul’s eschatological outlook for ethnic Israel in Rom 11:26. Theologically, View 3 jibes with Paul’s teaching about two kinds of Israelites, the believing ones and the unbelieving ones. Those who persist in advocating View 1 present a classic case in tendentious exegesis.

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In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, persistent support remains for the contention that the term *Israel* may refer properly to Gentile believers in the present age. Incidental support for this is claimed in such passages as Rom

*S. Lewis Johnson was a long-time faculty member at both Dallas Theological Seminary and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School as well as a teaching elder at Believers Chapel, Dallas, Texas. This essay appeared in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, eds. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer, which was published by Moody Press in 1986. The essay is used by permission of the publisher.

2:28-29; 9:6; and Phil 3:3; but the primary support is found in Gal 6:16 where Paul writes, "And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God" (NASB). The rendering of the NIV illustrates the point, for it has, "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God." It is obvious from this rendering that the term "the Israel of God" is to be equated with "all who follow this rule," that is, with believers in the present age, whether Jew or Gentile.

This rendering of the verse serves quite well the purpose of those who would like to find NT justification for the practice of the spiritualization of Scripture, that is, the habit of taking OT texts regarding ethnic Israel and referring them to the NT church.¹

I cannot help but think that dogmatic considerations loom large in the interpretation of Gal 6:16. The tenacity with which this application of "the Israel of God" to the church is held in spite of a mass of evidence to the contrary leads one to think that the supporters of the view believe their eschatological system, usually an amillennial scheme, hangs on the reference of the term to the people of God, composed of both believing Jews and Gentiles. Amillennialism does not hang on this interpretation, but the view does appear to have a treasured place in amillennial exegesis.

In speaking of the view that the term refers to ethnic Israel, a sense that the term *Israel* has in every other of its more than sixty-five uses in the NT and in its fifteen uses in Paul, in tones almost emotional, William Hendriksen, the respected Reformed commentator, writes, "I refuse to accept that explanation."²

I am reminded of the comment of Irving Kristol, John M. Olin Professor of Social Thought at the New York University Graduate School of Business. In another connection he once said, "When we lack the will to see things, as they really are, there is nothing so mysterious as the obvious."

It is often said by NT and OT scholars that systematic theologians do not pay enough attention to the text and its exegetical details. The claim is too frequently justified, but there is another side to the question. It may also be said that biblical scholars often unwittingly overlook their own theological presuppositions, logical fallacies, and hermeneutical errors. What I am leading up to is expressed neatly by D. W. B. Robinson in an article written about twenty years ago: "The glib citing of Gal. vi:16 to support the view that 'the church is the new Israel' should be vigorously challenged. There is weighty support for a limited interpretation."³ We can say more

¹For a defense of the hermeneutical practice see Albertus Pieters, "Darbyism vs. the Historic Faith," *Calvin Forum* 2 (May 1936):25-28; Martin J. Wymgaarden, *The Future of the Kingdom in Prophecy and Fulfillment: A Study of the Scope of the "Spiritualization" in Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955) 167. Another familiar illustration of spiritualization is found in Oswald T. Allis's *Prophecy and the Church* (Wayne, Pa.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 149, where in the discussion of Acts 15:12-21 Allis refers the rebuilding of the tabernacle of David to the ingathering of the Gentiles in the church age.

²William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 247.

³D. W. B. Robinson, "The Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians," *Australian Biblical Review* 13 (1965):29-48.

than this, in my opinion. There is more than weighty support for a more limited interpretation. There is overwhelming support for such. In fact, the least likely view among several alternatives is the view that “the Israel of God” is the church.

I propose to review the present status of the interpretation of Gal 6:16, then offer an analysis grammatically, exegetically, and theologically of the principal suggested interpretations. A few concluding comments will bring the essay to its termination.

GALATIANS 6:16 IN CONTEMPORARY INTERPRETATION

VIEW ONE: “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” IS THE CHURCH

A few words will suffice for the context of the text in Galatians, for there is general agreement regarding it. Whereas others boast of their conquests and their statistics in winning adherents to their legalistic cause, Paul would confine his boasting to the cross of Christ, by which he had been severed from the world and its spirit. In Christ and in the church of Christ the circumcision issue has lost its relevance. He lives in the realm of the new creation where walking by the Spirit prevails. For those who walk accordingly there is the blessing of peace and mercy, and that also touches the Israel of God. His scars in the service of Jesus, not circumcision, certify and authenticate his confession that his master is the Lord. And, fittingly, picking up the note of grace with which he began his letter (cf. 1:3), a benediction concludes the epistle. So much for Gal 6:11-18.

Three principal interpretations have characterized the exegesis of Gal 6:16. The first is the claim that “the Israel of God” is simply a term descriptive of the believing church of the present age. The term is linked with the preceding words, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy by upon them,” by an explicative *kai* (NASB, “and”; NIV, “even”), giving practically the sense of apposition. The Israel of God is the body who shall walk by the rule of the new creation, and they include believing people from the two ethnic bodies of Jews and Gentiles.

It is well-known that Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho* is first author to claim an identification of the term *Israel* with the church.⁴ Of the commentators, Chrysostom is one of the earliest apparently to identify the church with Israel, affirming that those who keep the rule are “true Israelites.”⁵ Others who follow this view include Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., and Eugene Nida,⁶ Ragnar Bring,⁷

⁴*Dialogue with Trypho* 11:1-5, etc.

⁵*Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians and Homilies on the Epistle to the Ephesians of S. John Chrysostom*, new rev. ed. (London: Walter Smith [Late Mosley], 1884) 98.

⁶Daniel C. Arichea, Jr., and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1975) 158-59. Very disappointing help is provided for the translator here.

⁷Ragnar Bring, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. Eric Wahlstroin (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 291.

John Calvin,⁸ R. A. Cole,⁹ N. A. Dahl,¹⁰ Donald Guthrie,¹¹ William Hendricksen,¹² Robert L. Johnson,¹³ M. J. Lagrange,¹⁴ Hans K. LaRondelle,¹⁵ R. C. H. Lenski,¹⁶ J. B. Lightfoot,¹⁷ Martin Luther,¹⁸ Herman Ridderbos,¹⁹ Henrich Schlier,²⁰ and John R. W. Stott.²¹

The list of names supporting this view is impressive, although the bases of the interpretation are few and feeble, namely, the claim that the *kai* (KJV “and”;

⁸John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 118. Calvin contends that the term *Israel of God* “includes all believers, whether Gentiles or Jews.”

⁹R. A. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 183-84. A cursory treatment in which the author appears to consider the key term as simply another way of saying “the people of God.”

¹⁰N. A. Dahl, “Der Name Israel: I. Zur Auslegung von Gal. 6, 16,” *Judaica* 6 (1950):161-70, a two-part article containing a debate with Gottlob Schrenk over the meaning of the term.

¹¹Donald Guthrie, ed., *Galatians*, The Century Bible (London: Thomas Nelson, 1969) 161-62. Though relating the terms *peace* and *Israel* to Ps 125:5, where the latter term refers to ethnic Israel, Guthrie says, “Israel seems to refer to the same people as ‘all who walk by this rule,’” that is, the church.

¹²Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians* 246-47.

¹³Robert L. Johnson, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians* (Austin, Tex.: Sweet, 1969) 179-80. He has confused the question of the proper punctuation of the text.

¹⁴M. J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul Epste aux Galates* (Paris Libraire Lecoffre, 1950) 166. Lagrange, however, denies the explicative sense by which Lightfoot and others understand the *kai* before *epi ton Israel tou theou*. He understands it as simply copulative, “ouvrant un plus large horizon.”

¹⁵Hans K. LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews U., 1983) 108-14. LaRondelle’s defense of his position, made ostensibly according to sound hermeneutics, is faulty hermeneutically and logically.

¹⁶R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians and to the Philippians* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg, 1937) 320-21. Lenski takes the *kai* to express “explicative apposition.”

¹⁷J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (London: Macmillan, 1896) 224-25. Lightfoot takes the *kai* to be “epexegetic, i.e., it introduces the same thing under a new aspect” (225). Cf. Heb 11:17.

¹⁸Martin Luther, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, ed. Philip S. Watson (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, n.d.) 565.

¹⁹Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953) 227; cf. also his *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 336. In both works Ridderbos, for whose scholarship I have the greatest admiration, admits that Paul does not “generally,” or “in general” (*Paul*) speak of *Israel* as inclusive of all believers. In fact, he states that Paul “in general” continues to reserve the names “Israel,” “Jews,” and “Hebrews” for the national Jewish people (*Paul*, 336). Ridderbos’s use of “in general” and “generally” is a bit amusing, since he admits Gal 6:16 is the only example of such usage (if it is).

²⁰Henrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1951) 209. Schlier follows Lagrange in his understanding of *kai*.

²¹John R. W. Stott, *Only One Way: The Message of Galatians* (London: InterVarsity, 1968, 1974) 180. Stott takes the *kai* as “even,” but he also adds that it may be omitted, as the RSV does.

NASB, “and”; NIV, “even”) before the term “the Israel of God” is an explicative or appositional *kai*; the fact that the members of the church may be called “the seed of Abraham” (cf. Gal 3:29); and the claim that if one sees the “the Israel of God” as a believing, ethnic Israel, they would be included in the preceding clause, “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them.”²²

VIEW TWO: “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” IS THE REMNANT OF ISRAELITES IN THE CHURCH

The second important interpretation of Gal 6:16 and “the Israel of God” is the view that the words refer simply to believing ethnic Israelites in the Christian church. Does not Paul speak of himself as an Israelite (cf. Rom 11:1)? And does not the apostle also speak of “a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (cf. 11:5), words that plainly in the context refer to believing Israelites? What more fitting thing could Paul write, it is said, in a work so strongly attacking Jewish professing believers, the Judaizers, than to make it most plain that he was not attacking the true believing Jews? Judaizers are anathematized, but the remnant according to the election of grace are “the Israel of God.” At the conclusion of the *Kampfepistel*²³ the battle ceases, an “olive branch”²⁴ is offered to the beloved saints who are brethren. The epistle after a couple of lines concludes appropriately on the note of grace, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.”

Perhaps this expression, “the Israel of God,” contrasts with his expression in 1 Cor 10:18, “Israel after the flesh” (KJV), as the true, believing Israel versus the unbelieving element, just as in Rom 9:6 the apostle distinguishes two Israels, one elect and believing, the other unbelieving, but both ethnic Israelites (cf. vv. 7-13).

The names in support of this second interpretation are not as numerous, but they are important for scholarly attainment. They include Hans Dieter Betz, the author of a very significant and original recent commentary on Galatians, one destined to be consulted by advanced students of the letter for years to come,²⁵

²²This is the contention of Anthony A. Hoekema in his well-argued *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 197. It is a clever observation but unconvincing, especially in the light of Mark 16:7 and its *kai iōi Petrōi* (KJV, “and Peter”). It is clear that the *kai* may single out for special attention someone or something from a larger body or element.

²³Schrenk’s description of Galatians in his article, “Der Segenwunsch nach der Kampfepistel,” *Judaica* 6 (1950):170.

²⁴Cf. Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* 183.

²⁵Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 320-23.

Charles J. Ellicott,²⁶ Walter Gutbrod,²⁷ Adolf Schlatter,²⁸ and Gottlob Schrenk.²⁹

VIEW THREE: "THE ISRAEL OF GOD" IS THE FUTURE REDEEMED NATION

The third of the interpretations is the view that the expression "the Israel of God" is used eschatologically and refers to the Israel that shall turn to the Lord in the future in the events that surround the second advent of our Lord. Paul would then be thinking along the lines of his well-known prophecy of the salvation of "all Israel" in Rom 11:25-27. As F. F. Bruce comments, "For all his demoting of the law and the customs, Paul held good hope of the ultimate blessing of Israel."³⁰

There are some variations in the expression of their views, but those who hold that *Israel* here either refers to or includes the nation as a whole that will turn to the Lord eschatologically, in line with Romans 11, include F. F. Bruce, Ernest De

²⁶Charles J. Ellicott, *A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians with a Revised Translation* (Andover, Mass.; Draper, 1880) 154. Valuable for grammatical analysis, his commentaries illustrate the fact that the old is not always to be overlooked.

²⁷*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "Ioudaios, Israēl, Ebraios in the New Testament," by Walter Gutbrod, 3:387-88. Gutbrod's comments are quite significant. He points out that Paul "neither could nor would separate the term from those who belong to Israel by descent." Cf. Rom 11:17-24.

²⁸Adolf Schlatter, *Die Briefe an die Galater, Epheser, Kolosser and Philemon* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1963) 150-51. He says Paul refers here in the blessing to the Israel that is a new creation in Christ, just as he is. Paul does not forget his genuine brethren (cf. Rom 11:1; Phil 3:5).

²⁹In two important articles Gottlob Schrenk argues persuasively for the second interpretation. His comments on the grammatical usage of *kai*, as well as the usage of *Israel* and *peace* (cf. Ps 124:5, LXX; 127:6, LXX), are telling. Cf. Gottlob Schrenk, "Was bedeutet 'Israel Gottes?'" *Judaica* 5 (1949):81-95; "Der Segenwunsch nach der Kampfepistel," *Judaica* 6 (1950):170-90. The second article is a reply to Dahl's response to his first article. I find Schrenk much more convincing.

³⁰F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *The New International Greek Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 275.

Witt Burton,³¹ W. D. Davies,³² Robert Govett,³³ Franz Mussner,³⁴ and Peter Richardson.³⁵

It is perhaps appropriate at this point to note simply that the weight of contemporary scholarship is opposed to the prevailing interpretation of amillennial interpreters that “the Israel of God” refers to the church, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers, although the subjective nature of this comment is recognized by this writer. It is based upon the fact that those who hold to the second and third views unite in their opposition to the prevailing amillennial interpretation.

AN ANALYSIS OF THE COMPETING INTERPRETATIONS

VIEW ONE: “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” IS THE CHURCH

Grammatical and syntactical considerations. It is necessary to begin this part of the discussion with a reminder of a basic, but often neglected, hermeneutical principle. It is this: in the absence of compelling exegetical and theological considerations, we should avoid the rarer grammatical usages when the common ones

³¹Ernest De Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) 357-59. Burton argues for a change in the common punctuation of the verse, preferring to put a comma after *autous* (NASB, “them”), pointing out that if *eirēnē* (NASB, “peace”) and *eleos* (NASB, “mercy”) were taken together, the order is illogical, for the effect would be placed first and the cause afterwards. Further, in countering the claim that the final clause of the verse is explicative of those who walk according to this rule and thus composed of both Jews and Gentiles in the church, he says, “[T]here is, in fact, no instance of his [Paul’s] using *Israel* except of the Jewish nation or a part thereof” (358). Burton takes the “and mercy” to be an afterthought and the final words, “and upon the Israel of God,” to be a second afterthought. He contends that the *kai* (NASB, “and”) following *eleos* (NASB, “mercy”) is slightly ascensive, introducing the last clause, “and mercy upon the Israel of God” (Burton’s rendering). This last clause refers to “those within Israel who even though as yet unenlightened are the true Israel of God” (ibid.). His view would be strengthened, it seems to me, if he had taken the first *kai* after “them” as copulative or continuative and the second one after “mercy” as adjunctive, rendering the verse, “And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy also upon the Israel of God,”

³²W. D. Davies, “Paul and the People of Israel,” *New Testament Studies* 24:4-39. Davies specifically finds it difficult to see *Israel* here as the church of Jews and Gentiles, which would be contrary to Pauline usage elsewhere. He says, “If this proposal were correct one would have expected to find support for it in Rom. ix-xi where Paul extensively deals with ‘Israel’” (11 note). Davies’s views are not very definite or clear, but he does admit that the desire for peace in v. 16, recalling the *Shemoneh Esreh*, may refer to the Jewish people as a whole (10).

³³Robert Govett, *Govett on Galatians* (Miami Springs, Fla.: Conley and Schoettle, 1981 [orig. ed., 1872]) 233-36. Govett, the well-known nineteenth-century independent scholar, and pastor, referred the clause “and upon the Israel of God” to “the renewed men of Israel, whom God will restore to Himself and to their land in millennial days” (235). Cf. Pss 135:5; 128:5-6; Isa 54:7-8, 10; Mic 7:20.

³⁴Franz Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief* (Frieberg: Herders, 1977) 417. He links the clause with Rom 11:26. His final comments are, “So deutet der Apostel in Gal 6, 16 schon an, was er dann in Rom 9–11 explizieren wird. Paulus hat sein Volk nie vergessen” (417). The “Israel of God” is identical with the “all Israel” of Rom 11:26.

³⁵Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1969) 74-84. Richardson’s discussion is one of the lengthiest of the treatments of the text.

make good sense.

We do not have the space to discuss the semantic range of the Greek conjunction *kai*. The standard grammars handle the matter acceptably. Suffice it to say, there are several well-recognized senses of *kai* in the NT. First and most commonly, *kai* has the continuative or copulative sense of *and*. Second, *kai* frequently has the adjunctive sense of *also*. Third, *kai* occasionally has the ascensive sense of *even*, which shades off into an explicative sense of *namely*.³⁶

The ascensive sense, to my mind, is to be distinguished from an explicative, or epexegetic, sense. It expresses a further, a heightened, identification of a term. For example, I might say, "I visited Dallas, I even visited Dallas Theological Seminary." The *kai* would be an ascensive *kai*. But suppose I said, "I visited Dallas, even the home of the Dallas Cowboy football team." The *kai*, then, would be practically an appositional *kai*. It would be called explicative or epexegetical by some. The point I would like to make is that the English word *even* has multiple usage also. In fact, I tend to think that this may account for renderings such as the "even" of the NIV.

The genuine and fairly common usage of *even* in the ascensive sense in Greek has been taken over in English and made an *even* in the rather rare explicative or appositional sense. Because the latter usage serves well the view that the term "the Israel of God" is the church, the dogmatic concern overcame grammatical usage. An extremely rare usage has been made to replace the common usage, even in spite of the fact that the common and frequent usage of *and* makes perfectly good sense in Gal 6:16.

There are other uses of *kai*, such as an emphatic and an adversative use, but these uses are so rare that we may safely drop discussion of them.

As for the problem, the first interpretation referred to above, that in which the term "the Israel of God" is referred to the believing church, involves taking *kai* in an explicative sense³⁷ and the rendering of it as *even*. There are compelling objections to this view. In the first place, this usage in the light of *kai* in all phases of the literature is proportionately very infrequent, as both G. B. Winer³⁸ and Ellicott acknowledge. Ellicott contends that it is doubtful that Paul ever uses *kai* in "so marked an explicative sense."³⁹ There is not anything in recent grammatical study and

³⁶Schrenk lists as examples of the explicative usage 1 Cor 8:12; 12:27f.; 14:27; 15:38; 2 Cor. 5:15. The usage is often found in conjunction with *kai touto*, as in 1 Cor 2:2; 5:1; 6:6, 8, 10-11; Rom 13:11; Eph 2:8; cf. Heb 11:12. A cursory study of these instances will cast doubt over the validity of some of the examples. Cf. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. and rev. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1961) 228-29; Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples*, adapted from the 4th Latin ed. by Joseph Smith (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963) 152-54. Zerwick is undecided about Gal 6:16 (154).

³⁷Cf. Lenski, *Interpretation of Saint Paul's Epistles* 320-21; Lightfoot, *Epistle to the Galatians* 25; Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* 197.

³⁸G. B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek, Regarded as a Sure Basis for New Testament Exegesis*, trans. with additions by W. F. Moulton, 9th English ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882) 546.

³⁹Ellicott, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* 154. He also discusses and questions other of the relatively few claimed instances of this usage.

research that indicates otherwise.

Finally, if it were Paul’s intention to identify the “them” of the text as “the Israel of God,” then why not simply eliminate the *kai* after “mercy?” The result would be far more to the point, if Paul were identifying the “them,” that is, the church, with the term “Israel.” The verse would be rendered then, “And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them and mercy, upon the Israel of God.”⁴⁰ A case could be solidly made for the apposition of “the Israel of God” with “them,” and the rendering of the NIV could stand. Paul, however, did not eliminate the *kai*.

These things make it highly unlikely that the first interpretation is to be preferred grammatically. Because both of the other suggested interpretations are not cumbered with these grammatical and syntactical difficulties, they are more likely views.

Exegetical considerations. Under this heading are covered matters of context, both general and special, and matters of usage, both Pauline and other.

We turn again to consider the first interpretation, namely, that the “them” refers to the present people of God, and the term “the Israel of God” is a further description of the “them.” From the standpoint of biblical usage this view stands condemned. There is no instance in biblical literature of the term *Israel* being used in the sense of the church, or the people of God as composed of both believing ethnic Jews and Gentiles. Nor, on the other hand, as one might expect if there were such usage, does the phrase *ta ethnē* (KJV, “the Gentiles”) ever mean the non-Christian world specifically, but only the non-Jewish peoples, although such are generally non-Christians.⁴¹ Thus, the usage of the term *Israel* stands overwhelmingly opposed to the first view.⁴²

The usage of the terms *Israel* and *the church* in the early chapters of the book of Acts is in complete harmony, for Israel exists there alongside the newly formed church, and the two entities are kept separate in terminology.

Occasionally, Rom 9:6 has been advanced in support of the view that *Israel* may include Gentiles. Paul writes, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (NASB). But that will not do, for Paul is here speaking only of a division within ethnic Israel. Some of them are believers and thus truly Israel, whereas others, though ethnically Israelites, are not truly Israel, since they are not elect and believing (cf. vv. 7-13). In the NASB rendering, the words “who are descended from Israel” refer to the natural descendants of the patriarchs, from Abraham through Jacob, whereas the opening words, “they are not all Israel,” limit the ideal sense of the term to the elect within the nation, the Isaacs and the Jacobs (cf. Rom 4:12). No Gentiles

⁴⁰Cf. Schrenk, “Der Segenwunsch,” *Judaica* 6 (1950):177-78.

⁴¹Cf. Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972) 49.

⁴²Cf. Davies, “Paul and the People of Israel” 11, who with others makes the point that if Israel here should include believing Gentiles, one would expect to find support for this in Romans 9-11. But none is there.

are found in the statement at all.⁴³

A book of recent vintage is that of Hans K. LaRondelle, entitled *The Israel of God in Prophecy: Principles of Prophetic Interpretation*. It launches a broad-scale attack on dispensational views and lectures dispensationalists for their hermeneutical lapses. In his treatment of Gal 6:16, Professor LaRondelle, a Seventh Day Adventist, takes a number of unsupportable positions, as well as largely avoiding obvious difficulties with his scheme of things. He misunderstands the general context of Galatians to begin with, contending that it is written by Paul to reject “any different status or claim of the Jewish Christians beside or above that of gentile Christians before God.”⁴⁴ On the contrary, the apostle is concerned with correcting the gospel preached to the Galatians by the Judaizers, particularly their false contention that it was necessary to be circumcised to be saved and to observe as Christians certain requirements of the law of Moses in order to remain in divine favor (cf. Gal 1:6-9; 2:1-3:29; 4:1-31; 5:1-4; 6:11-18). The apostle makes no attempt whatsoever to deny that there is a legitimate distinction of race between Gentile and Jewish believers in the church. His statement in Rom 11:5 should have warned Professor LaRondelle against this error. There is a remnant of Jewish believers in the church according to the election of grace. That the professor overlooked Paul’s careful language is seen in his equation of terms that differ. He correctly cites Paul’s statement that “‘there is neither Jew nor Greek’ in Christ”⁴⁵ (cf. Gal 3:28) but then a couple of pages later modifies this to ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek’ *within the Church*’⁴⁶ (emphasis added), as if the terms *Christ* and *church* are identical. This approach fails to see that Paul does not say there is neither Jew nor Greek within the church. He speaks of those who are “in Christ.” For LaRondelle, however, inasmuch as there is neither Jew nor Greek within the church and in Christ, there can be no distinction between them in the church. But Paul also says there is neither male nor female, nor slave nor free man in Christ. Would he then deny sexual differences within the church? Or the social differences in Paul’s day? Is it not plain that Paul is not speaking of national or ethnic difference in Christ, but of spiritual status? In that sense there is no difference in Christ.

Throughout LaRondelle’s discussion of the text there is no acknowledgment, so far as I can find, of the fact that the term *Israel* is never found in the sense of the church. Is not that very relevant to the interpretation of Galatians 6:16?

Finally, to sum up his position, Professor LaRondelle affirms that since the church is the seed of Abraham and Israel is the seed of Abraham, the two entities, the church and Israel, are the same. The result is a textbook example of the fallacy of the

⁴³Cf. Gutbrod, “Israel” 3:387. He comments, “On the other hand, we are not told here that Gentile Christians are the true Israel. The distinction at R. 9:6 does not go beyond what is presupposed at Jn. 1:47, and it corresponds to the distinction between *loydaios en tō krypṓ* and *loydaios en tō phanerō* at R. 2:28f., which does not imply that Paul is calling Gentiles the true Jews.”

⁴⁴LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* 108.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid., 110.

undistributed middle.⁴⁷

Theological considerations. Peter Richardson has pointed out that no historical evidence points to the term *Israel* being identified with the church before A.D. 160. Further, at that date there was no characterization of the church as “the Israel of God.”⁴⁸ In other words, for more than a century after Paul there was no evidence of the identification.

To conclude the discussion of the first interpretation, it seems clear that there is little evidence—grammatical, exegetical, or theological—that supports it. On the other hand, there is sound historical evidence against the identification of *Israel* with believing or unbelieving Gentiles. The grammatical usage of *kai* is not favorable to the view, nor is the Pauline or NT usage of *Israel*. Finally, if D. W. B. Robinson’s article is basically sound, the Pauline teaching in Galatians contains a recognition of national distinctions in the one people of God.⁴⁹

VIEW TWO: “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” REFERS TO JEWISH BELIEVERS IN PAUL’S DAY

Perhaps it would be appropriate to confine attention to Hans Dieter Betz, due to the widespread recognition of his excellent commentary. He treats v. 16 as a conditional blessing upon those who walk according to the rule of the new creation mentioned in v. 15,⁵⁰ remarking also on its uniqueness in Pauline literature. After a discussion of the term “the Israel of God,” Betz concludes amid some ambiguity that the sentence refers to a blessing on those who remain faithful Paulinists in the Galatian churches, including both those of Gentile extraction and believing, ethnic Jews. His final comment is, “Thus, Paul extends the blessing beyond the Galatian Paulinists to those Jewish-Christians who approve of his *kanon* (‘rule’) in v 15.”⁵¹

Grammatical and syntactical considerations. In order to keep from prolonging the discussion, and also since the final interpretation has many similarities with the second, just a few comments are in order. So far as I can tell, there are no grammatical, or syntactical, considerations that would be contrary to Betz’s view. The common sense of *kai* as continuative, or copulative, is followed.

⁴⁷LaRondelle’s comments on Gal 6:16 indicate little, if any, interaction with Burton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, the finest old technical commentary on Galatians; Betz, *Galatians*, the best new technical work in English; Bruce in his excellent work *Galatians: Commentary on the Greek Text*; or with the periodical articles of Dahl, Schrenk, and Robinson. The carefully thought through article by Robinson is particularly appropriate for questions concerning Gal 6:16, as its title (“The Distinction between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians”) indicates.

⁴⁸Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* 83. Many amillennialists, including LaRondelle, overlook this.

⁴⁹Cf. Robinson, “The Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians,” especially 47-48.

⁵⁰Betz, *Galatians* 320-21.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 323.

Exegetical considerations. Exegetically, the view is sound, since “Israel” has its uniform Pauline ethnic sense. And further, the apostle achieves a very striking climactic conclusion. Drawing near the end of his “battle-epistle” with its harsh and forceful attack on the Judaists⁵² and its omission of the customary words of thanksgiving, Paul tempers his language with a special blessing for those faithful, believing Israelites 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. They, not the false men from Jerusalem, are “the Israel of God,” or, as he calls them elsewhere, “the remnant according to the election of grace” (cf. Rom. 11:5).

Theological considerations. And theologically the view is sound in its maintenance of the two elements within the one people of God, Gentiles and ethnic Jews. Romans 11 spells out the details of the relationship between the two entities from Abraham’s day to the present age and on to the fulfillment in the future of the great unconditional covenantal promises made to the patriarchs.

VIEW THREE: “THE ISRAEL OF GOD” REFERS TO THAT BODY OF ETHNIC ISRAEL WHO ARE SAVED AT THE MESSIAH’S RETURN

Exegetical considerations. The third view of “the Israel of God,” namely, that the term is eschatological in force and refers to the “all Israel” of Romans 11:26, is an extension of the previous interpretation. It, too, takes the term “the Israel of God” to refer to ethnic Israel but locates their blessing in the future. Their salvation was a great concern of Paul, as his ministry attests (cf. Rom 9:3-5; 10:1). An impressive array of contemporary interpreters hold this view, although with some minor variations.

Because Peter Richardson, largely following Burton, has discussed the matter at some length, his views will be emphasized. Seeking to overthrow the common misconception that “the Israel of God” refers to the church composed of both believing Gentiles and believing Jews, he makes the following points: First, the unique order of peace and mercy, probably suggested by Jewish benedictions, particularly Benediction XIX of the *Shemoneh Esreh* (Babylonian recension), may be significant. The prayer has the order of peace and then mercy in it, followed by a reference to “us and all Israel.”⁵³ Other OT passages, such as Ps 124:5 (= 127:6), offer more general parallels. In such places “Israel” is used ethnically and, if there is Pauline dependence on them, he probably used the term ethnically.

Second, the strange order of peace and mercy suggests, as Burton

⁵²The force of 1:8-9 and its “let him be accursed” is very strong, since *anathema* referred ultimately to that under the divine curse. In Rom 9:3 Paul says he could pray to be *anathema* from Christ, that is, consigned to Gehenna, if his people could be saved by his sacrifice. In other words, it is almost as if Paul were saying, “If any man should preach a contrary gospel, let him go to hell!” Galatians certainly is a “Kampfepistel!”

⁵³Cf. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* 78-80.

contended, a repunctuation of the text as commonly edited. A comma should be placed after “them,” and the comma after “mercy” found in many English versions⁵⁴ and in editions of the Greek text should be eliminated. The text may then be rendered, *And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy also upon the Israel of God* (or *peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God*).

Third, Richardson suggests that the future tense in “shall walk” may carry, by analogy, its future idea over into the benediction regarding mercy. In other words, it may point to Israel’s future belief. This seems questionable to me.

Fourth, “the Israel of God” is a part of the whole Israel (cf. Rom 9:6).

Fifth, the *kai* is only slightly ascensive, forestalling any inference that Paul in Galatians is condemning everything about Israel.⁵⁵ Richardson thinks the presence of the *kai* is important and argues strongly against the view that the church is the Israel of God. If it were omitted, then that view would be strengthened, but its acknowledged presence is a major signpost pointing in another interpretive direction.

Sixth, just as Mussner, Bruce, and others, Richardson sees the expression as a reference to a hoped-for future conversion of ethnic Israel, a view that Paul expounds in detail in the great theodicy of Romans 9–11.

Mussner’s identification of the phrase with Paul’s “all Israel” of Rom 11:26 is in harmony with Richardson. Thus also Bruce, who concludes his discussion with, “The invocation of blessing on the Israel of God has probably an eschatological perspective.”⁵⁶

Evaluative summary. Grammatically and syntactically, this last option is sound, whether we adopt Burton’s repunctuation of the text or not. There may exist some question regarding the exegetical aptness of the eschatological perspective. That certainly has not been one of the major emphases of the Galatian epistle as a whole, but in the immediate context it is very appropriate psychologically, providing a note of hope and expectation after a stern and severe admonition. And, further, the Abrahamic covenant and its benefits have been constantly before the readers, and the whole of the OT as well as previous NT revelation testifies to its glorious future consummation. Heirship of Abrahamic covenant blessing and the kingdom of God, mentioned just a few lines previously (cf. 5:21), fit in well with an eschatological note.⁵⁷

Theologically the view harmonizes with the important Pauline teaching that

⁵⁴Contrast the NASB.

⁵⁵Cf. Burton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* 358.

⁵⁶Bruce, *Galatians: Commentary on the Greek Text* 275.

⁵⁷Several linguistic matters lend further support to an eschatological perspective. In addition to the mention of the phrase “the kingdom of God,” the frequent use of the concept of promise in the letter (cf. 3:14; 16, 17, 18 [twice], 19, 21, 22, 29; 4:23, 28) and the concept of inheritance (cf. 3:14, 18, 29; 4:1, 7, 30; 5:21), related as they are to the Abrahamic covenant, accent the future perspective. And finally, is there significance in the fact that the term *inheritance* in Romans 11 is related by Paul to God’s saving work toward the nation Israel in the future? The concept is found in 11:30, 31, and 32 in both noun and verb forms. And here in Gal 6:16 the concept appears also.

there are two kinds of Israelites, a believing one and an unbelieving one. The teaching is plainly set out in such passages as Rom 2:28-29; 4:11-12; 9:6; and 11:1-36. Gal 6:16 forms another link in the apostle's teaching.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY EXEGETICAL METHODOLOGY

It is not uncommon in our evangelical seminaries to hear exegetes criticize the systematic theologians for the tendency to approach the biblical text with dogmatic presuppositions that predetermine exegetical conclusions. Some of this criticism is justified, I will admit. Theologians do not come to the text without their presuppositions. The measure of the good theologian, such as a Calvin, an Owen, a Hodge, a Warfield, a Murray, and a Berkower, is the skill with which one recognizes them, handles them, and avoids their dominion over us.

What is not as common as it should be in our schools, however, is the recognition of the fact that exegetes are exposed to the same perils and at least as often succumb to them. Presuppositionless exegesis is an illusive mirage, and exegesis is finest when it acknowledges the fact and seeks to guard against it. Exegetes frequently are as guilty of false methodology as that financial writer whose logic and unsound premises the *London Economist* once neatly impaled by commenting that he was "proceeding from an unwarranted assumption to a foregone conclusion."⁵⁸

The present study illustrates this. If there is an interpretation that totters on a tenuous foundation, it is the view that Paul equates the term "the Israel of God" with the believing church of Jews and Gentiles. To support it, the general usage of the term *Israel* in Paul, in the NT, and in the Scriptures as a whole is ignored. The grammatical and syntactical usage of the conjunction *kai* is strained and distorted—and the rare and uncommon sense accepted when the usual sense is unsatisfactory—only because it does not harmonize with the presuppositions of the exegete. And to compound matters, in the special context of Galatians and the general context of the Pauline teaching, especially as highlighted in Romans 11, Paul's primary passages on God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles, are downplayed. If, as LaRondelle asserts, "Paul's benediction in Galatians 6:16 becomes, then, the chief witness in the NT in declaring that the universal church of Christ is the Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, the heir to Israel's covenant promise (cf. Gal. 3:29; 6:16),"⁵⁹ then the doctrine that the church of Gentiles and Jews is *the* Israel of God rests on an illusion. It is a classic case of tendentious exegesis.

⁵⁸Steward Chase, *Guides to Straight Thinking: With 13 Common Fallacies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956) 122

⁵⁹LaRondelle, *The Israel of God in Prophecy* 110-11.

REFLECTIONS ON LOGICAL FAILURE

This is hardly the place to enlarge upon this theme. It has been done well elsewhere.⁶⁰ Nevertheless I think it is permissible to suggest that exegetes seem particularly prone today to logical fallacies. The case of the undistributed middle, mentioned earlier, underlines the importance of clear thinking in exegetical discussion.

REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

A certain rigidity in evangelical eschatological debate emerges again in the discussion of Gal 6:16. For example, amillennialists seem to desire strongly to equate “the Israel of God” with the church. Some amillennialists, however, think an ethnic future for Israel is compatible with their system. An example of this is found in the fine work of Anthony A. Hoekema on eschatology. He grants that an ethnic future for Israel would with certain strictures be compatible with his amillennial views, but he argues strongly against such an interpretation.⁶¹

Why, then, are amillennialists so opposed generally to an ethnic future for Israel? That is not an easy question to answer. It may be perfectly conceivable that an amillennialist would grant that an ethnic future for Israel at the Lord’s return could be fitted into his system. But if such a normal interpretation of the language of the OT is followed in this instance, it is difficult to see how one can then escape the seemingly plain teaching of the many OT prophecies that the nation Israel shall enjoy a preeminence in certain respects over the Gentiles in the kingdom that follows our Lord’s advent (cf. Isa 60:1-4; 62:1-12; Mic 4:1-5; Hag 2:1-7; Zech 14:16-21, etc.).

On the other hand, the case for premillennialism does not rest on the reference of the term “the Israel of God” to ethnic redeemed Israel here. Its case against the exegetical practice of the spiritualization of the Scriptures would be weakened a bit, but premillennialism’s support in the history of the church’s eschatological interpretation, in the use of the grammatico-historico-theological method of exegesis, and in the interpretation of Scripture by the prophets and the apostles would still stand firm.

Let the church, then, seek to avoid the practice of rigidly, tendentiously defending its systems. Let us listen to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures, and then let us freely and forcibly proclaim what we are taught. After all, His system—and there is such—is the best one.

⁶⁰Cf. D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 91-126.

⁶¹Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* 146-47. He also adds certain strictures to the common perception of a future for Israel. Referring to Rom 11:26 he says, “There is nothing in the passage which would rule out such a future conversion or such future conversions, as long as one does not insist that the passage points *only* to the future, or that it describes a conversion of Israel which occurs *after* the full number of Gentiles has been gathered in” (147). That, of course, is just what Rom 11:25-27 does do. It points to the future, and the conversion of Israel is placed by the apostle after the gathering in of the Gentiles. It, therefore, really is difficult for Hoekema to include an ethnic future for Israel in his amillennial scheme.