

How is the Term **Israel** Used in the New Testament?

Covenant and reformed theologians believe that New Testament believers, including saved Gentiles, are the true Israel of God. Is it really Biblical to refer to Gentile believers as Israelites? Has God created a “new Israel” that is composed of believing Jews and Gentiles of this present age?

Let us search the Scriptures to see if these things be so. We will examine the 73 times in the New Testament where the term “Israel” is used. How does the New Testament use this term? Is it ever used of the church in general or saved Gentiles in particular?

The following article is taken from the book *Israelology—the Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, by Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum. It is used with his permission.

The Use of **Israel** in the New Testament

Covenant Theologians boldly state that the Church is the new Israel and sometimes make it sound as if that claim is an obvious foregone conclusion of the New Testament. Cox even claimed that the two terms are used interchangeably. The truth is that the term “Israel” is used a total of 73 times in the New Testament. As the following list shows, such a bold claim is unwarranted from the evidence:

Matthew 2:6	Quotation of Micah 5:2 which prophesies that the Messiah “shall be shepherd of my people Israel .”
Matthew 2:20	Geographical reference concerning the family’s return to “the land of Israel .”
Matthew 2:21	Same as above.
Matthew 8:10 and Luke 7:9	Jesus contrasts the faith of the Roman Centurion with that of unbelieving Israel : “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel .”
Matthew 9:33	The response of the multitudes to the miracles of Jesus, “It was never so seen in Israel .”
Matthew 10:6	The disciples are instructed not to go among the Gentiles and Samaritans but to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel .”
Matthew 10:23	Geographical notation of the work of the disciples in “the cities of Israel .”
Matthew 15:24	Christ’s ministry was “unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel ”

Matthew 15:31	The multitudes “glorified the God of Israel ” when they saw the miracles of Jesus.
Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30	The disciples are promised authority over “the twelve tribes of Israel .”
Matthew 27:9	Quotation of Zechariah 11:12-13 which prophesied that the Messiah will be sold out for thirty pieces of silver by “the children of Israel .”
Matthew 27:42 and Mark 15:32	Jesus is mocked as “the king of Israel .”
Mark 12:29	Quotation of Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear O Israel .”
Luke 1:16	The ministry of John was to get “many of the children of Israel ” to turn to the Lord.
Luke 1:54	God has provided the Messiah to give help “to Israel his servant.”
Luke 1:68	A reference to God as “the God of Israel .”
Luke 1:80	John was in the deserts until “the day of his showing unto Israel .”
Luke 2:25	Simeon was looking for the Messianic Hope as “the consolation of Israel .”
Luke 2:32	While the Messiah was to be a light for revelation to the Gentiles,” He is also to be for “the glory of thy people Israel .”
Luke 2:34	The Messiah is appointed to be “for the falling and rising of many in Israel .”
Luke 4:25	An historical reference to the “widows in Israel ” in the days of Elijah.
Luke 4:27	An historical reference to the “lepers in Israel ” in the days of Elijah.
Luke 24:21	The two Emmaus disciples describe Jesus as the one they hoped would “redeem Israel .”
John 1:31	The Messiah was to “be made manifest to Israel ” through John’s baptism.
John 1:49	Nathanael described Jesus as the “King of Israel .”
John 3:10	Jesus refers to Nicodemus as “the teacher of Israel .”
John 12:13	The multitudes at the triumphal entry describe Jesus as “the King of Israel .”
Acts 1:6	The disciples ask, “Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel ?” Obviously, the disciples had ethnic Israel and not the Church in mind in this context.

Acts 2:22	Peter is addressing an unbelieving Jewish audience and states, “Ye men of Israel.” Contextually, this could hardly be the Church.
Acts 2:36	This is the same audience as the above reference.
Acts 3:12	Peter is again addressing an unbelieving Jewish audience with the words, “Ye men of Israel .” As unbelievers, they could hardly be the Church.
Acts 4:10	Peter clearly has the whole ethnic Israel in view when he declares to “all the people of Israel ” that the lame man was healed “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.”
Acts 4:27	Israel is listed along with the Gentiles as being guilty of the crucifixion. This could hardly be the Church.
Acts 5:21	A reference to “the senate of the children of Israel ” Who were unbelievers and, therefore, not the Church.
Acts 5:31	Peter offers “repentance to Israel .” Israel is in unbelief at this point and so is obviously not the Church.
Acts 5:35	Gamaliel addressing his fellow members of the Sanhedrin states, “Ye men of Israel ,” none of whom were believers.
Acts 7:23	Stephen is making an historical reference to “the children of Israel ” of the time of Moses.
Acts 7:37	Same as above.
Acts 7:42	Same as above.
Acts 9:15	God declares that Paul will proclaim the gospel to Gentiles and to “the children of Israel .” This is a reference to Jews who do not believe as yet.
Acts 10:36	Peter refers to the now historical fact that Jesus came to preach the gospel “unto the children of Israel ,” the majority of whom did not believe the message and so did not constitute the Church.
Acts 13:16	Paul is addressing an unbelieving Jewish audience when he states, “men of Israel .”
Acts 13:17	Paul refers to the historical “this people Israel ” of the time of the Exodus.
Acts 13:23	Paul mentions the historical fact that the Messiah had come to the Jews in fulfillment of the “promise brought unto Israel .”
Acts 13:24	Paul refers to the historical fact that John the Baptist preached “repentance to all the people of Israel .”
Acts 21:28	The “men of Israel ” in this verse is the mob who attacked Paul.

Acts 28:20	Paul declares that he is chained for “the hope of Israel ,” a reference to the Messianic Hope and not the Church.
Romans 9:4	Paul lists the privileges God gave the “Israelites” already discussed.
Romans 9:6	Paul draws a contrast of two Israels: Israel the whole, and believing Israel within Israel the whole. Both Israels comprise Jews only. While some Covenant Theologians wish to make the believing Israel the Church, other Covenant Theologians agree that this verse contrasts Jews who believe and Jews who do not.
Romans 9:27	Another contrast between unbelieving Israel and the believing remnant.
Romans 9:31	A reference to unbelieving Israel who “did not arrive at that law.”
Romans 10:19	Paul declares that Israel received the message, but did not accept it.
Romans 10:21	God’s hands are stretched out to unbelieving Israel still.
Romans 11:1	Paul refers to himself as an “ Israelite ” nationally and ethnically.
Romans 11:2	Paul makes an historical reference to the fact that “Elijah pleaded with God against Israel ” because of Israel’s unbelief.
Romans 11:7	Paul again draws a contrast between Israel the whole that failed to obtain what she was seeking for with the remnant, “the election,” that did.
Romans 11:25	Paul speaks of the blindness that had befallen Israel .
Romans 11:26	The prophecy that all Israel will be saved. Covenant Theologians are split on the meaning of this verse. Generally speaking, Covenant Amillennialists see this as a reference to the Church, while Covenant Postmillennialists and Covenant Premillennialists see it as a reference to national ethnic Israel .
1 Cor. 10:18	The “ Israel after the flesh” is obviously national ethnic Israel .
2 Cor. 3:7	An historical reference to “the children of Israel ” at the time of Moses.
2 Cor. 3:13	Same as above.
2 Cor. 11:22	Paul refers to both unbelieving Jews and to himself as “ Israelites .”
Galatians 6:16	Paul’s reference to the “ Israel of God” is the only reference used by all Covenant Theologians to prove that the Church is called Israel . This verse will be discussed in detail below
Ephesians 2:12	The “commonwealth of Israel ” is contrasted with the Gentiles and with the “one new man” which is the Church.

Philippians 3:5	Paul refers to himself as coming from “the stock of Israel ,” an obvious reference to his national ethnic origins.
Hebrews 8:8,10	A quotation of the New Covenant of Jeremiah.
Hebrews 11:22	An historical reference to the Israel of the Exodus
Revelation 7:4	A reference to the twelve tribes of Israel
Revelation 21:12	Same as above

The above list is the total times that “Israel” is mentioned in the New Testament and it is obvious even to Covenant Theologians that the vast majority of the times it refers to national ethnic Israel. In fact, only three passages are used by Covenant Theologians to try to prove their Church=equals-Israel equation. On two of these, Romans 9:6 and 11:26, they are not unanimous, for even some Covenant Theologians see these verses as speaking of national ethnic Israel. The only one verse on which all Covenant Theologians are unanimous is Galatians 6:16. This is the one and only verse that even comes close to saying what Covenant Theologians want it to say. Therefore, it will be given its own separate treatment.

The [Israel](#) of God of Galatians 6:16

The purpose of this section is to present a dispensational view of Galatians 6:16, the only passage produced by all Covenant Theologians as evidence that the Church is the spiritual Israel, or that Gentile believers become spiritual Jews. The verse does not prove their case. The passage reads:

And as many as shall walk by this rule, peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the [Israel](#) of God.

The Book of Galatians is concerned with Gentiles who were attempting to attain salvation through the law. The ones deceiving them were Judaizers, who were Jews demanding adherence to the Law of Moses. To them, a Gentile had to convert to Judaism before he qualified for salvation through Christ. In verse 15 Paul states that the important thing for salvation is faith, resulting in the new man. He then pronounces a blessing on two groups who would follow this rule of salvation through faith alone. The first group is the “them,” the Gentile Christians to and of whom he had devoted most of the epistle. The second group is the “[Israel](#) of God.” These are Jewish believers who, in contrast with the Judaizers, followed the rule of salvation by faith alone. Covenant Theologians must ignore the primary meaning of *kai* [the conjunction which is usually translated “and”] which separates the two groups in the verse in order to make them both the same group.

In a recent work, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, former professor of Greek and New Testament Exegesis at Dallas Theological Seminary, has done a detailed study of Galatians 6:16. In his introduction, Johnson makes the following observation:

In spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there remains persistent support for the contention that the term [Israel](#) may refer properly to Gentile believers in the

present age . . . the primary support is found in Galatians 6:16 . . .

I cannot help but think that dogmatic considerations loom large in the interpretation of Galatians 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 New Testament and in its fifteen uses in Paul, in tones almost emotional William Hendriksen, the respected Reformed commentator, writes, “I refuse to accept that explanation.” . . .

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 Galatians 6:16 to support the view that ‘the church is the new Israel’ should be vigorously challenged. There is weighty support for a limited interpretation.” We can say more 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. [Toussaint and Dyer, *Pentecost Essays*, “Paul and ‘The Israel of God’: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case-Study” by S. Lewis Johnson, pp. 181-182. Quoted in William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Galatians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1868), p. 247, and D. W. B. Robinson, “The Distinction Between Jewish and Gentile Believers in Galatians,” *Australian Biblical Review* 13 (1965): 29-48.]

Johnson presents three views concerning this verse. Only the first insists that “the Israel of God” is the Church as a whole while the other two limit it to Jewish believers. The first view is described as follows:

This first is the claim that “the Israel of God” is simply a term descriptive of the believing church of the present age 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 [Ibid., p. 183].

The basis for the first view is:

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* . . . before the term “the Israel of God” is an explicative or appositional *kai*; . . . and the claim that if one sees the term “the Israel of God” 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” [Ibid., p. 184].

Johnson rejects this view on three grounds. The first is for grammatical and syntactical reasons for which there are two [Ibid., pp. 187-188]. The first is that this view must resort to a secondary or

lesser meaning of *kai*:

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 make good sense [Ibid., p. 187].

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* (*kai*) makes perfectly good sense in Galatians 6:16 [Ibid., p. 188].

Second, Johnson points out that if Paul’s intention was to identify the “them” as being the “Israel of God,” then the best way of showing this was to eliminate the *kai* altogether. As shown earlier, this was exactly what Hendriksen wanted to do by leaving *kai* untranslated. The very presence of the *kai* argues against the “them” being “the Israel of God.” As Johnson notes, “Paul, however, did not eliminate the *kai*” [Ibid., p. 188].

The second ground for rejecting this view is for exegetical considerations, which deals with context and usage. Concerning usage, Johnson states:

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 *to ethne* (KJV, “the Gentiles”) ever mean the non-Christian world specifically, but only the non-Jewish peoples, although such are generally non-Christians. Thus, the usage of the term *Israel* stands overwhelmingly opposed to the first view.

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 [Ibid., p. 189].

For those who would cite Romans 9:6 as evidence, Johnson shows that this verse is no support for such a view for the distinction is between Jews who believe and Jews who do not:

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 . . . No Gentiles are found in the statement at all [Ibid., p. 189].

Even many Covenant Theologians have agreed with this view of Romans 9:6 and do not use it to support their view of Galatians 6:16. As for context, Johnson observes:

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 . . . The apostle makes no attempt whatsoever to deny that there is a legitimate distinction of race between Gentile and Jewish believers in the church There is a remnant of Jewish believers in the church according to the election of grace 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.” . . . 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 differences in Christ, but of spiritual status? In that sense there is no difference in Christ [Ibid., p. 190].

The third ground for rejecting this view is theological:

. . . there is no historical evidence that the term *Israel* was identified with the church before A.D. 160. Further, at that date there was no characterization of the church as “the Israel of God.” In other words, for more than a century after Paul there was no evidence of the identification [Ibid., p. 191].

Johnson’s summary concerning the rejection of the first view is:

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 New Testament usage of *Israel*. Finally, . . .the Pauline teaching in Galatians contains a recognition of national distinctions in the one people of God [Ibid., p. 191].

The second view is that “the Israel of God” is the believing Jewish remnant within the Church. This is Johnson’s own view and is the common dispensational view. Johnson describes this view as follows:

The second of the important interpretations of Galatians 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. Rom. 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.” . . .

Perhaps this expression, “the Israel of God,” is to be contrasted with his expression in 1 Corinthians 10:18, “Israel after the flesh” (KJV), as the true, believing Israel versus the unbelieving element, just as in Romans 9:6 the apostle distinguishes two Israels, one elect and believing, the other unbelieving, but both ethnic Israelites (cf. vv. 7-13) [Ibid., p. 185].

Johnson supports this view on the same three grounds that he rejected the first view. On grammatical and syntactical grounds, Johnson states that “there are no grammatical, or syntactical considerations that would be contrary” to this view and, furthermore, the “common sense of *kai* as continuative, or conjunctive is followed” [Ibid., p. 192]. In other words, it uses the primary meaning of *kai*.

On exegetical grounds Johnson states:

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 Judaists 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) [Ibid.].

As for theological grounds, Johnson states:

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 [Ibid.].

The third view agrees with the second, that “the Israel of God” must refer to Jewish believers and not the Church as a whole but sees this Jewish remnant as still future:

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 Romans 11:25-27 [Ibid., p. 186].

The third view . . . takes the term “the Israel of God” to refer to ethnic Israel but locates their blessing in the future . . . [Ibid., p. 192].

Johnson has no major objections to the third view for “grammatically and syntactically this last option is sound” [Ibid., p. 193]. Theologically, this view is also sound for:

. . . the view harmonizes with the important Pauline teaching that there are two kinds of Israelites, a believing one and an unbelieving one [Ibid., p. 194].

The only real problem is exegetical since “. . . the eschatological perspective . . . has not been one of the major emphases of the Galatian epistle as a whole. . . .” [Ibid.]. However, Johnson allows for the exegetical possibility of this view for the wider context did mention the Abrahamic Covenant and the Kingdom of God.

The second view is probably the best. While the third is biblically acceptable, the first view is not. Johnson concludes:

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* is Paul, in the New Testament, 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. . . . the doctrine that the church of Gentile and Jews is *the* Israel of God rests on an illusion. It is a classic case of tendentious exegesis [Ibid., p. 195].

CONCLUSION

For Dispensational Israelology, the conclusion is that the Church is never called, and is not, a “spiritual Israel” or a “new Israel.” The term “Israel” is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within. It is never used of the Church in general or of Gentile believers in particular.

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