



Guard Yourself Against Identity Theft

By Dr. Gary Hedrick

Who Is the Israel of God in Galatians 6:16?



We've all heard about identity theft, and some of us have experienced it firsthand. It's a crime where a thief pretends to be you. He hacks into your credit card accounts and wreaks havoc, often stealing money right out from under your nose, making your credit score tank. It's a serious problem, especially in our digital economy. During the most recent year for which figures are available, roughly 16.6 million Ameri-

cans experienced at least one incident of identity theft. Financial losses for that year totaled a staggering \$24.7 billion.

However, there's another form of identity theft that many people are unaware of—spiritual identity theft. Another name for it is supersessionism, or replacement theology.¹ It's a deception where professing Christians hijack Israel's identity and take

exclusive ownership of the promises God made to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In this article, Dr. Gary Hedrick, the president of Christian Jew Foundation Ministries (CJFM) and editor-in-chief of *Messianic Perspectives*, takes a closer look at spiritual identity theft. His article was first published in January of 2016 and is republished here with minor edits.



The Range of Options in Defining “The Israel of God:”

1. “The Israel of God” is the NT church, the spiritual seed of Abraham who have displaced the physical seed of Abraham. This is the majority view in Christendom today. Yeshua but insisted that non-Jews should undergo a de facto conversion to Judaism (via circumcision) in order to gain full recognition as Yeshua followers.
2. It’s an eschatological reference to the “all Israel” that Paul says will be saved at the end of the age (Rom. 11:26). 4. It was a localized phenomenon in Paul’s day—i.e., a “non-judaizing” group of Jewish Christians in Galatia.
3. It’s a self-designation used by Paul’s Judaizing opponents in Galatia and elsewhere. NOTE: The judaizers were observant Jewish individuals who had professed faith in 5. It’s a reference to Jewish people anywhere who are believers in Yeshua—so they represent the overlap between Israel and the church.

Bruce Waltke, a Harvard-trained Anglican scholar and prolific writer, defines supersessionism in blunt yet honest terms. He says it means that “national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant.”²

Replacement theologians build their case largely by redefining the term “Israel” in the New Testament — Galatians 6:16 in particular — and making it apply to the church. However, the word “Israel” appears 75 times in the New Testament, and in every instance but one, the terms “Israel” and “the church” cannot be interchanged without

reducing the passage to absurdity.³ When the New Testament says “church,” that’s what it means: the corporate body of New Testament believers.⁴ And when it says “Israel,” it means ethnic Israel: the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The consistent testimony of God’s Word is that “Israel” refers to *Am Yisrael*, the “people of Israel.”

The one exception is Galatians 6:16 where Paul refers to “the Israel of God.” Almost universally, Christian commentators through the ages have said it refers to the church, the New Israel. W. A. Criswell, the

much-revered pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas for more than half a century, was a respected scholar (PhD from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) with a deep and abiding love for Israel and the Jewish people. He never believed that the church had replaced Israel, but he admitted for years that he nonetheless struggled with Galatians 6:16. It seemed to leave the door open for replacement theology, and he wanted to know why. Everything else in the Bible was cogent and consistent, as far as he could tell, except that one verse. At the end of this article, I’ll show you how he finally and conclusively

¹ Some proponents of supersessionism seek to soften the term a bit by emphasizing fulfillment rather than replacement: “Supersessionism is the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is the fulfillment of biblical Judaism, and therefore that Jews who deny that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah fall short of their calling as God’s Chosen People” (“supersessionism” on *Theopedia* at www.theopedia.com).

² In his essay (“Kingdom Promises as Spiritual”) in John Feinberg’s *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishers, 1988), Waltke describes two “hard” realities as opposite sides of a coin: “As the obverse side of the NT coin bears the hard imprint that no clear passage teaches the restoration of national Israel, its reverse side is imprinted with the hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant” (274).

³ One example of absurdity would be replacing “Israel” with “the church” in a passage like Luke 4:27. The result reads like this: “And many lepers were in the church in the time of Elisha the prophet.” Or what about Hebrews 8:8, where God says *He will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*: If the house of Israel is the church, who’s the house of Judah? Does the church have northern and southern kingdoms?

⁴ The Greek word translated “church” is *ekklesia*, meaning “a called-out assembly” (its Hebrew equivalent is *kahal*). *Ekklesia* is the word the Greek New Testament uses to denote the church (i.e., the body of believers in Yeshua the Messiah) because we’ve been “called out” of the world to become His disciples (John 15:19). It doesn’t refer to towering steeples or ecclesiastical institutions, but rather to God’s people serving God and each other under His headship. The New Testament church was founded on the Day of Pentecost (*Shavu’ot*), when God breathed life (the Holy Spirit) into His earthly “body” (Acts 2:1-21). Not only that, but when the Lord Himself spoke of building His church, it was in the future tense (Matt. 16:18), implying that the church had not yet been called into existence. So what about the fact that the KJV uses the English word “church” in Acts 7:38 to describe the Old Testament Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai? Doesn’t that mean the church existed in the Old Testament? No, it doesn’t. The Septuagint (LXX), a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, uses the word *ekklesia* in numerous passages to denote the Jewish “congregation” (or “assembly”) of Israel—so the KJV translators were simply taking a cue from the LXX when they used the word “church” in Acts 7:38. The congregation of Israel in the Old Testament was an *ekklesia* in the sense that they were “a called-out assembly.” (The Hebrew New Testament uses *kahal* [lit., “assembly”] to translate the Greek *ekklesia* in Acts 7:38.) The Old Testament congregation of Israel is always functionally distinct from the New Testament church—just like the “elders” of Israel (e.g., Num. 11:16; Acts 25:15) are distinct from the “elders” of the church (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5; Jas. 5:14). The two sets of elders finally come together in Revelation (12 + 12 = 24), but even then, they are distinct (4:4).



resolved his problem with this enigmatic verse.

First, though, let's go to the verse itself and talk about it. Why do so many people take the term "Israel," which uniformly means ethnic Israel throughout the New Testament, and then abruptly plug in a different definition (i.e., the New Testament church) in Galatians 6:16?

Here's what the Apostle Paul says in this much-debated verse: *And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.* It's only 17 words in the original Greek text, but it has occupied the attention of theologians since earliest times.

To supersessionists, the church is the New Israel or the new people of God—"the Israel of God." Old (ethnic) Israel has faded permanently into oblivion, they say, because she (through her national representatives, the Sanhedrin) rejected the Messiah in the first century (Matt. 26:65-66). But is this really what Paul had in mind when he used this term "the Israel of God" (Gk., τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ Θεοῦ)? I am an advocate of comparing Scripture with Scripture; however, it doesn't help us here because there are no other passages to compare. "The Israel of God" is a unique expression. Galatians 6:16 is the only place in the Bible where it appears.

So, who, exactly, is this "Israel of God"? Well, let's see if we can do some sanctified detective work and uncover the answer to that question.

Paul's Rule

Since we are doing detective work, let's begin by taking a look at the scene of the crime. What does the verse itself tell us about "the Israel of God"? It says they (whoever "they" are) enjoy *shalom* (Heb., "peace") and *rachamim* ("mercy" or "compassion") because they walk according to a certain "rule" with the believers in Galatia.⁵

Next, what was "this rule" (or "canon"; Gk., κανὼν) that they observed so scrupulously? Whenever we run across a perplexing word or phrase in Scripture and we can't figure out what it means, the solution is usually nestled somewhere nearby, in the passage itself. In fact, the demonstrative pronoun "this" (as in "this rule") in verse 16 makes it sound as though it's something Paul has just mentioned. So, what rule did the apostle lay down just prior to verse 16? Here it is:

For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of Adoneinu Yeshua haMashiach [our Lord Jesus Christ], by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation. (Gal. 6:13-15)

The rule, then, is that we don't boast or trust in anything other than the finished work of the Messiah on Calvary. There's nothing we can do to supplement what He

did there. Through the merits of His sacrifice, imputed to us when we placed our faith in Him, each Christian has been made a "new creation." In Him, we have new life, new priorities, new purpose, a new nature, and a vital, new relationship with our Creator—and it's all His doing! Writing to another church, Paul said, *Therefore, if anyone is in [Messiah], he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (2 Cor. 5:17).*

Messianic Pharisees

In Galatia, there were evidently Jewish people from the Pharisaic party who believed that Yeshua was the Messiah, but didn't consider faith in Him to be sufficient by itself. Their legal background in Judaism, steeped in layers of traditional and cultural Torah observance, may have made it more difficult for them to accept the validity of salvation by grace and through faith alone. But for whatever reason, they wanted circumcision to be a requirement. So, if a Gentile in Galatia wanted to become a believer in Yeshua, these Messianic Pharisees wanted him to undergo a de facto conversion to Judaism and be circumcised.⁶

Even today, some two thousand years later, this problem of *additionalism* (my term for piling more requirements on top of simple faith) persists! Many professing believers want to supplement Messiah's work of redemption with things like church membership, confirmation, baptism, emotionalism, living a good and ethical life, or whatever it might be.

⁵ The New Testament was written in Greek, of course. We sometimes use Hebrew equivalents for words like "peace" and "mercy" because the biblical writers were Jewish and almost certainly had Hebrew terms and concepts in mind as they were writing these divinely-inspired words. Employing some of the Hebrew terms is our way of emphasizing the Jewishness of the New Testament and the early Messianic (Jewish-Christian) movement.

⁶ For a more detailed treatment of this topic (i.e., whether Gentile believers should be required to convert to Judaism and be circumcised), see Chaim Urbach's article "To Convert or Not to Convert—That Is the Question" on the *Messengers Messianic Jewish Outreach* website (www.messiahnj.org).



When we say salvation is by grace and through faith alone, maybe the additionalists think our approach (i.e., no other conditions for salvation) is too minimalistic—or just too easy. Surely there’s something we can do to curry God’s favor, even if it’s just a tiny, little bit! Perhaps that’s their thinking. But alas, as humbling as it is, there’s nothing we can do. Like the old hymn says, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling.” When Yeshua died on that old, rugged, Roman execution stake two thousand years ago, the work of redemption was finished forever (Jn. 19:30). He did it all; there is nothing we can contribute other than simply accepting it by faith.⁷

The Power of a Three-Letter Word

Every word of the Bible is important. That’s why we believe in the “verbal” (word-for-word) inspiration of the Bible rather than in watered-down “thought inspiration.”⁸ Galatians 6:16 is a good example of a verse where the correct interpretation can hang on just one word—in this instance, the little conjunction *kai* (“and”).⁹

Again, here’s what the verse says: *And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and*

mercy be upon them, AND (kai) upon the Israel of God. That final *kai* determines the relationship between “the Israel of God” and “as many as walk according to this rule.” Are the two entities one and the same? Or are they distinct? That’s the issue here.

There are two ways to interpret the controversial *kai* in Galatians 6:16:

1. The first possibility is that the second *kai* should be translated “even,” indicating that both phrases (“the Israel of God” and “as many as walk according to this rule”) refer to the same entity.¹⁰ The result looks like this: “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, EVEN (*kai*) upon the Israel of God.” (And yes, “even” falls within the range of meaning for the Greek word *kai*.) If this is the correct translation, the church is most likely “the Israel of God.” Early replacement theologians like Justin Martyr and John Chrysostom treated it like an equation—i.e., “as many as walk according to this rule” = “the Israel of God”—because their assumption was that “the Christian church is ‘the true, spiritual Israel’” (Martyr in *Dialogue with Trypho* 11.5).

2. The other possibility is that this critical *kai* should be translated “and” because it introduces another category of believers: namely, Jewish believers in Yeshua the Messiah. The term “Israel” denotes the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—with “the Israel of God” (Jewish followers of Yeshua) being a subset of greater “Israel.” This category would encompass Jewish people who are Yeshua followers. The translation looks like this: “And as many as walk according to this rule [i.e., the Gentile believers in Galatia], peace and mercy be upon them AND (*kai*) upon the Israel of God [the Jewish believers among them].”

Note that Paul blesses “the Israel of God” with “peace” and “mercy.” The apostle would have been well acquainted with the appended portion of the ancient Eighteen Benedictions, known collectively as “the Amidah” (from *Tefilat HaAmidah*, “the Standing Prayer”). It concludes with: “Blessed are You, O LORD, Who blesses Your people Israel with peace.” (...)

⁷ Some commentators suggest that when Yeshua died on the cross, He didn’t finish the work of redemption. One writer, for example, says it wasn’t fully complete until the Lord entered the heavenly Tabernacle and sprinkled His own blood on the mercy seat (see “It Was Not Finished” by David J. Stewart at www.jesus-is-savior.com). Others claim that the work of redemption wasn’t completed until Yeshua was resurrected on the third day following the crucifixion (Rom. 4:25). However, these other views tend to overlook the finality of the Greek *tetelestai* (“it is finished”) in John 19:30. The perfect-passive-indicative verb form signifies a once-and-for-all action with results that continue indefinitely and enduringly into the future. That is, redemption was finished in the past; it is still finished now, and it will continue to be finished in the future. All that remains now is for the redemption that has already been wrought to be fully worked out in history. Clearly, the idea is that Jesus’ role as our Passover sacrifice had been fulfilled according to the Scriptures by His death and the shedding of His blood (Isa. 53:7-10; I Cor. 5:7). “The verb *τελέω* fundamentally denotes ‘to carry out’ the will of somebody, whether of oneself or another, and so to fulfill obligations or carry out religious acts. ‘It is accomplished!’ renders that aspect of the word. Doubtless both meanings of the term, the temporal and the theological, are intended here. ‘So the last word of Jesus interprets his suffering and dying as the crowning conclusion and high point of the work that he has performed in obedience’ (Dauer, *Passionsgeschichte*, 20)” (George R. Beasley-Murray in *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 36: John* [Dallas: Word Books, 1999], 352).

⁸ The term *inspiration* refers to the method God used to convey His written revelation to the world through the instrumentality of human authors. The New Testament says the Bible’s content was “breathed out” by God (II Tim. 3:16-17), with the end result being that its words are God’s words. Plenary-verbal inspiration means that we believe “all” of the Bible is inspired (that’s what the word *plenary* means), even down to its singular “words” (*verbal*) in the original languages. Thought inspiration, on the other hand, erroneously maintains that only the concepts and ideas in Scripture are inspired by God—not necessarily the words themselves.

⁹ In the Greek text, the conjunction in question is the *καί* (“and” or “even”) right before the phrase *ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ* (“upon the Israel of God”).

¹⁰ This has been referred to as an exegetical use of the conjunction *kai*.



There has always been a believing remnant—an “Israel of God,” if you will—within the ranks of God’s earthly people Israel (e.g., 1 Kgs. 19:18). Paul may well have been taking this opportunity to point out that Jewish believers—by virtue of their personal relationship with *Sar Shalom*, the Prince of Peace—foreshadowed the yet-future fulfillment of that ancient prayer for peace on the People of Israel.

Commentators who object to this second view (i.e., that Jewish believers constitute “the Israel of God”) claim that it’s inconsistent with Paul’s statement in Galatians that under the terms of the New Covenant, there is no more distinction between Jew and Gentile: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua* (Gal. 3:28). But is that really what the verse is saying? After all, during the course of his missionary journeys, Paul often mentioned his own Jewish heritage and ethnicity, and was readily recognized by others as Jewish (Acts 19:34; 21:39; 22:3; 23:6; 26:5; Phil. 3:5). His statement in Galatians 3:28 about the unity of believers, then, was surely not

intended to suggest that a Jewish believer is no longer recognizable as Jewish once he’s in the Body of Messiah, just as it wasn’t meant to suggest that men and women are no longer distinguishable from one another in the family of God. The fact is that Paul continued to embrace his Jewish identity even long after he became a believer in Yeshua.¹¹

F. F. Bruce has a variation on this second view. Leaning on the work of a German commentator, Franz Mussner, Dr. Bruce takes an eschatological approach, suggesting that “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16 is the same entity as the end-time “all Israel” in Romans 11:26.¹² He includes this note from church history: “So Marius Victorinus, the earliest Latin commentator on Paul [in the fourth century AD], comments on the phrase: ‘not “[peace] on Israel” in the sense of any and every Jew, but “[peace] on the Lord’s Israel”; for Israel is truly the Lord’s if it follows the Lord, not expecting its salvation from any other source.’”¹³

So, then, what sector of Israel would this be? Who among the Jewish people would not be expecting salvation from any other source than the Lord himself? It could only be Jewish believers in Yeshua the Messiah.

They represented the overlap between the church and Israel.

Circumcision: Back-Door Entree for Legalism

If we’re right about “the Israel of God” being a reference to Jewish believers, the phrase itself may have been meant as a slap in the face for Paul’s Pharisaic opponents in Galatia (but I doubt that they responded with, “Thanks, I needed that!”). As we have already seen, they were insisting that Gentiles who came to faith in Yeshua should be circumcised according to the Law of Moses: *But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses”* (Acts 15:5).

So when Paul says “the Israel of God” walks according to this rule—boasting in nothing other than the death of Messiah Yeshua—these Messianic Pharisees would have readily recognized the stark contrast between Paul’s grace-based paradigm and their own works-based approach.

Is it okay for a believer to be circumcised? Yes, of course—as long as there’s an understanding that the physical procedure does

¹¹ Charles Halff, the founder of CJF Ministries, said he was irritated to no end by Christians he encountered who commented that he “used to be Jewish.” He objected to the insinuation that when he became a believer in Yeshua, he was “converted” from being Jewish to being something else. He would often tell these people, “No, no, you don’t understand. My DNA didn’t change. I was born a Jew and I’ll die a Jew.”

¹² F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 273-75.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Circumcision is a surgical procedure that removes a portion of the foreskin on the male baby’s genitalia (Gen. 17:11). It was a sign of the unilateral, grace-based covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants through the line of Isaac and Jacob. The works-based Sinai Covenant came later and was broken by Israel almost from its very inception (Jer. 31:32); and once it was broken, it was no longer in force as a legally binding covenant (Heb. 8:13). Now the Sinai Covenant is a legitimate and beneficial expression of Jewish culture and history; but it doesn’t regulate Israel’s relationship with God. Today, believing Israel is under the New Covenant, which is essentially a restatement of the original, grace-based, unconditional Abrahamic Covenant. One difference, however, is that “circumcision” under the New Covenant isn’t merely a medical procedure. Rather, it’s a spiritual circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:29, Jer. 31:33-34, see also Jer. 4:4). A bris for the heart wasn’t unheard of in the Old Testament, by the way; God elaborated on it as early as Deuteronomy 10:12-16.

¹⁵ Note that in Acts 15, circumcision was merely the starting point for a whole system of legalistic Torah observance. Luke records that the Pharisaic Jewish Christians were saying, “It is necessary to circumcise [non-Jewish believers], and to command them to keep the law of Moses” (v. 5). The apostles convened a council in Jerusalem to deal with this matter and they decided that non-Jewish believers are not obligated to observe Jewish cultural norms or traditions (Acts 15:24-29). Instead, perhaps so they wouldn’t feel like they were being neglected, the Gentile believers were provided with their own, abbreviated list of guidelines that appears to be derived, at least in part, from the seven



nothing to enhance one's spiritual standing before God. Most Jewish believers want to identify culturally with their Jewish community, and that includes circumcision for males. But at the same time, they understand that it doesn't score any brownie points with God. It's simply a way for them to identify with their Jewish heritage.

Paul himself said that *in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation* (Gal. 6:15). So if you're circumcised, that's fine. And if you're not, that's fine, too. The important thing is that you've become a new creation by placing your faith in the Lord Yeshua the Messiah.

The problem arises when someone starts thinking that circumcision is more important than it really is.¹⁴ It can become an access point for legalism to make inroads into the life of a believer.¹⁵ It's a concern because performance-based religion can be a source of great frustration, uncertainty, and anxiety for young or inexperienced believers.¹⁶ It can also contaminate the true message of salvation by grace, sometimes even to the point of morphing it into "another gospel" (2 Cor. 11:4).

Proof-texting Replacement Theology

Galatians 6:16 isn't the only text supersessionists rely on for Scriptural support.¹⁷

Another key passage for them is I Peter 2:9-10:

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

Even though the term "Israel" doesn't appear here, replacement theologians find particular significance in Peter's application of Jewish terminology to the church. To them, it confirms that the church has taken Israel's place in God's program. Why else would Peter apply "Israel" language (i.e., "chosen generation [or race]," "royal priesthood," "holy nation," and God's "own special people," all drawn from Isaiah 43:20 and Exodus 19:5-6) to the church?

This is the majority view in Christendom today, especially among those in the Reformed camp. They say Peter uses this Messianic, royal language (drawn from the Hebrew Bible) because the church has inherited Israel's status as the people of God.

So how do we explain this? Very simply, there's another, markedly different reason for Peter's application of this Messianic

terminology to the church. Peter was writing his letter primarily to Jewish believers in Yeshua (i.e., Jewish Christians). He was using this language to remind them that they have a rich heritage as the believing remnant of Israel (referred to by Paul as "the Israel of God" in Galatians) and that they are the vital link between Israel and the church.

This, in fact, is the most reasonable, logical, and biblical way to reconcile both passages (Gal. 6:16 and I Pet. 2:9-10) from a non-supersessionist perspective.

While it's true that most commentators today don't take this view (i.e., that Peter was addressing his fellow Jewish believers in his epistle), it turns out that it is well attested all the way back to the earliest days of church history. A substantial number of ancient writers concluded that I Peter was addressed to Jewish believers. Here's what Michael Vlach says:

Hiebert points out that "Origen and many others, saw them [Peter's audience] as Jewish Christians." These "others" include Calvin, Bengel, Weiss, Alford, English, and Wuest. In its introductory comments on I Peter, the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* states, "With few exceptions, the Fathers believed that

so-called Laws of Noah (see "Jewish Concepts: The Seven Noachide Laws" in the Jewish Virtual Library at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org). However, the New Testament is the "Torah of Messiah" (or the "Law of Christ"; Gal. 6:2) and includes everything we need to live godly lives (I Pet. 1:3). In Jewish tradition, there is a teaching that says when the Messiah comes, He will bring a new Torah with Him: "And the Messiah will sit in the Yeshiva, and all those who walk on earth will come and sit before him to hear a new Tora and new commandments and the deep wisdom which he teaches Israel" (Raphael Patai in *The Messiah Texts* [Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979], 256-57). Some Talmudic experts see this as contradicting the ninth of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of the Faith (which declares that "there will be no other Torah from the Creator"); but the teaching exists nonetheless.

¹⁶ Perhaps the most obvious problem with performance-based religion is that no one is able to perform consistently, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even when we commit ourselves to living in the power of the Holy Spirit, there are inevitably times when we will fail to live up to that ideal. Grace-based faith recognizes that our *position* "in Messiah" is divinely fixed and never wavers, even when our *practice* does. So when we sin, we ask for forgiveness and move on (I Jn. 1:8-9). Positionally, we are already seated with the Messiah in Heaven (Eph. 2:6). Practically, however, we're still down here in the trenches fighting a war (Eph. 6:12)!

¹⁷ The key proof texts supersessionists use to establish that the church is the New Israel are: Romans 2:28-29; 9:6; Galatians 3:7, 29; 6:16; and I Peter 2:9-10. Due to our space constraints, we are only dealing with two of these texts in this article.



this letter was written by the apostle Peter and sent to Jewish Christians in the Diaspora.” It then lists Eusebius of Caesarea, Didymus, Andreas, and Occumenius as those who held this view of the Jewish audience of 1 Peter.

Peter’s letter was written to “sojourners of dispersion” (1:1), which, as Hiebert points out, “has a strong Jewish coloring.” Some have argued that the use of the Septuagint in the OT quotations and the thrust of Peter’s argument would make Peter’s letter largely unintelligible to Peter’s readers if they included Gentiles. Plus, Paul points out that Peter was specifically the apostle to the circumcision (see Galatians 2:7-8).¹⁸

So, if our argument hinges on identifying Peter’s audience as Jewish (and it does, to a great extent), it would appear that we are on solid ground!

Writing in *The Moody Bible Commentary*, Professor Louis Barbieri provides this helpful summary:

Unlike those who are rejected by God (see [1 Peter] 2:8), Peter’s readers are A CHOSEN RACE (v. 9), probably referring to Jewish believers; a ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, a function no longer related to one tribe. They are a HOLY NATION, a set apart group, a PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION. Many

scholars claim that this verse indicates that the Church replaces Israel in God’s program, that the Church is the “New Israel,” and that ethnic Israel has significance in God’s plans only as it is incorporated into the Church that replaces Israel. But Peter is writing primarily to Jewish believers, and these terms are perfectly suitable for the present remnant of Israel, for Jewish believers during the current Church Age.¹⁹

“The Israel of God”— Why It Matters

Why should we care about the identity of “the Israel of God”? Why is it still important today, some two thousand years after Paul coined the term?

It’s important for several reasons:

1. *It’s important because it assures us that God always keeps His promises.*

God made promises in the Old Testament by making covenants with certain people. We know (from archaeological discoveries) that some covenants were conditional (bilateral) while others were unconditional (unilateral). The Abrahamic Covenant was primarily unconditional, but did have some conditional provisions. The unconditional provisions had to do with Abraham’s relationship to God, his posterity, and his

ownership of the land of Israel. The conditional aspects had to do mainly with his possession of the land.²⁰

The conditions for dwelling securely in the land are reflected, for example, in this warning from the Torah: “Therefore you shall not oppress one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the LORD your God. So you shall observe My statutes and keep My judgments, and perform them; and you will dwell in the land in safety” (Lev. 25:17-18). We know that Israel did not observe God’s statutes and judgments, and that they were expelled from the Promised Land by the Romans in AD 70. Their possession of the land came to an end (temporarily). However, the fact that God has preserved His people Israel, even through the desolate centuries following their expulsion, is evidence of His promise-keeping power and faithfulness—and since 1948, they have been in the process of repossessing their land. The children of Israel are still His ancient people, and the relentless attempts of their enemies to destroy them have utterly failed. God is faithful even when we are not.

And since God is setting the stage even now for the final fulfillment of His promises to Israel, and their spiritual resurrection as a nation,

¹⁸ Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2010), 147-48.

¹⁹ Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, gen. ed., *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 1961.

²⁰ Note that there are important legal distinctions between *owning* a parcel of land and actually *possessing* it. In modern real estate law, for instance, there’s a concept known as “adverse possession,” where someone possesses a piece of real estate without being the owner of record. Similarly, God made Israel’s *possession* of the land contingent on her obedience; but her *ownership* of the land has never changed because it is unconditional.



we too can take comfort in the assurance that He will likewise keep His promises to the church!

The covenant-keeping God who has not forgotten or forsaken the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the same God who will never forget or forsake us.

2. *It's important because it reminds us that there's always a believing remnant.*

Even during the darkest hours in her history, Israel has always had a faithful remnant of believers. When apostasy was rampant in the days of Elijah, for instance, and the feisty old prophet thought he was the only faithful one remaining (I Kgs. 19:10, 14), the Bible tells us that there were still seven thousand men left who hadn't bowed down to Baal (v. 18).

Likewise, there is a growing remnant of Jewish believers today—both in Israel and around the world. The new generation of believers that's rising up in Israel (consisting largely of young people who have grown up in believing homes) is deeply committed to their Jewish identity, and in many cases, they're even more bold and outspoken about their faith than the older generation!²¹

This proves conclusively that God has not rejected Israel permanently. If He were to do so, He would also be rejecting the believing remnant

among them—and that is impossible. That is precisely Paul's argument when he writes, *I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin* (Rom. 11:1).

If God had cast away His people Israel, He would have been casting away Paul, too! And that would have been, very simply, an impossibility.

3. *It's important because it informs our reading of the entire Bible.*

Some supersessionists concentrate on the New Testament and ignore most of the Old Testament. To them, the older revelation is passé and no longer applicable for believers. However, the central message of God's Word is redemption through the shed blood of the Messiah, and that unifying theme weaves its way from Genesis to Revelation. The Bible is a unified revelation. It is not schizophrenic.

The Older Covenant (the Jewish Tanakh) is about *anticipation*; the New Covenant (*Berit haChadashah*) is about *implementation*. One builds on the other and both are equally God's Word! In fact, Paul told Timothy that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for all things" (II Tim. 3:16). When Paul penned those words, the only Scripture they knew at the time was the Old Testament!

4. *It's important because it helps us understand future prophecy.*

We meet numerous people who say they struggle to understand prophecy. In many cases, the problem is that they're trying to unlock prophecy without the key—and that's Israel! The nation Israel is the linchpin around which God's end-time program revolves. If we lack a proper understanding of Israel's ongoing role in what God is doing here on earth, we will never understand prophecy.

5. *It's important because if "the Israel of God" isn't the church, the supersessionists are stealing someone else's identity.*

Are you concerned about the fact that ours is a minority view in Christendom today? Just think of the biblical characters who were outnumbered in their day—towering luminaries like Moses, Joshua, the Prophet Elijah, King David of Israel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Yeshua Himself (with only twelve rather ordinary guys as His disciples), among others. They obeyed God, stood alone when necessary, and ended up changing the world.

It's really not all that complicated. Paul said, *For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable* (Rom. 11:29). You can remove, temporarily, Israel's blessings, her land, her peace, her prominence, and you can even allow tyrants, tragically, to take the lives of her people (like the Nazis during the Holocaust); but you can never take away

²¹ See "Messianic Soldiers in the Israeli Army: Bolder than Ever about Their Faith" from *Kehila News* (March 1, 2016) at www.kehilanews.com.



her gifts or her divine calling. Those things flow from Israel’s identity as the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and that will never change.

One Preacher’s Epiphany

I told you earlier that I would share how Dr. Criswell figured out what Galatians 6:16 means. After years of frustration, he finally realized that this puzzling verse must be understood against the backdrop of the rest of the Bible. And he knew that everywhere else in the Bible, the term “Israel” refers to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, whoever they were, these people who were called “the Israel of God” had to be Jewish! On one Sunday morning in 1966,

Pastor Criswell shared with his congregation in downtown Dallas how the Lord showed him, at long last, the identity of “the Israel of God”:

[Paul] was talking about those Jewish people who had accepted the gospel of the grace of the Son of God without works. And in contradistinction to the Judaizers, he called these who believed in Jesus “the Israel of God.” . . . [They were] the Israelites who had come to find in faith alone in Jesus the pardon of sin, [and] the fulfillment of all of the Messianic prophecies. “The Israel of God” [is] the Jewish people who [have] found in Jesus a Savior. So all of it came to me; all of it, all of it,

without exception. There is no place in the Bible where the word “Israel” is used but that it refers to the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And there is no place in the Bible where the word “church” is used but that it refers to the called out *Ekklesia*, the elect assembly of God in this day and in this age of grace. And isn’t that an astonishing thing?²²

That’s how this godly pastor finally solved the mystery of “the Israel of God.” They were Jewish believers in Yeshua who trusted in Him and in nothing else! Along with Paul, who himself had been a Pharisee, this “Israel of God” stood firmly against the Messianic Pharisees who wanted to add more stipulations for salvation.

²² This excerpt is taken from a transcript of the sermon Dr. Criswell preached on Sunday, April 17, 1966, in the 10:50 a.m. service at First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas (accessed at www.wacriswell.com).