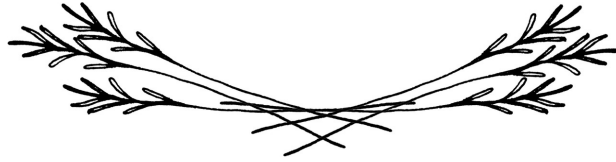


WEEK 2

THE ISRAEL OF GOD



NATHAN DAILY

Even though the phrase “Israel of God” occurs only one time in the Bible (Gal 6:16),¹ it stands alongside several images of the church that echo the content of the Hebrew Scriptures: “a chosen race,” “a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9), “twelve tribes” (Matt 19:28; Jas 1:1; Rev 7), “remnant” (Rom 11:5), and “Abraham’s offspring” (Rom 4:16).² Each of these help provide definition for how a community can imagine what it means to be known as the people of God.

Whereas some might speak of a “new” or “spiritual” Israel,³ this language is not found in the Bible. In fact, positing one Israel against another can detract from the continuity regarding the nature of God’s people that Paul is attempting to build through his use of the imagery in the Letter to the Galatians. Ultimately, Paul’s use of the phrase “Israel of God” encourages Christians to hear the entirety of the story of God and God’s people. After connecting the promises of God in the Hebrew Scriptures with the acts of God through the life and death of Jesus, Paul’s reference to Christians as the

¹ Cf. Eph 2:12; Heb 8:8–13; Rev 2:14; Matt 15:24; Acts 5:31; Luke 2:32.

² Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster, 1960; repr., 2004), 66–84.

³ See the theologically misleading interpretation of Gal 6:16 in the New Living Translation.

“Israel of God” becomes a significant image upon which Christians can create identity as they imagine both the benefits and obligations of inclusion within the people of God.

The Story of Israel

Before attempting to understand Paul’s reference to the Israel of God in Gal 6:16, it is necessary to recall the story of Israel. In the broadest of strokes, the narrative portions of the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen–Esther) can be read thematically as a story from creation (Gen 1–11), to the promises to Abraham, Sarah, and their children (Gen 12–50), to salvation from Egypt (Exod–Deut), to life in the Promised Land (Josh–1 Kgs 11), to the crises of divided kingdom and exile (1 Kings 12–2 Kgs), and toward hope of restoration (1 Chr–Esth). The poems (Job–Song) and prophets (Isa–Mal) of the Hebrew Scriptures provide an abundance of voices from the people of God throughout the history of Israel that express the varied experiences of life during these times as well as reactions to the joys, tragedies, and hopes narrated within the story.

Throughout time, God’s people have read, re-read, and discussed these texts not only to understand what happened in the past, but also in order to imagine how they, as readers, might create identity in the present. God’s people believe that true living occurs when a community attempts to understand, question, and discuss the depictions of God and humans, the relationships between God and humanity, and the relationships between humans in these texts. Experiencing what life is really about follows connecting to and living in tandem with the story of God and God’s people.

Much of the story of Israel⁴ can be read through the lens of promise and expectation. In Gen 12:1–3, Abram is singularly selected by God and receives from God a promise. The elements of this promise include land, becoming a great nation, and God’s blessing extending beyond Abram’s family to all nations. As Genesis progresses, the elderly, childless, and landless Abram and Sarai (Gen 12:4; 16:16; 17:1, 17; 18:11–12; 21:2,7) leave as commanded (12:1) but are met with a series of challenges (e.g., 12:10–20; 20:1–18; 22:1–19) that threaten the promise. Even as Abram and Sarai remain childless, God continues to reassert the promise of land and offspring (13:14–17; 15; 17; 21; 22:15–18) even though much of the promise may remain only partially fulfilled for many years (15:13–21). Following the tensest moment in the narrative, the binding of Isaac (22:1–19), which places the entirety of the promise in jeopardy, God reasserts the promise upon Abraham and his descendants (22:16–18).

Remembrance of God’s promise to Abraham is highlighted throughout the Torah (Exod 2:24; 3:15; 6:8; Lev 26:42; Deut 1:8; 29:13; etc.)⁵ in expectation of entrance into the Promised Land (Deut 31:23; Josh 23:5). Life in the land brings rest and fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham (Josh 21:44; 22:4; 23:1, 15; Jud 2:1). However, the safety of land comes with warning: Israel should not assume that peace equates with independence from need of their God. Obedience remains priority (Josh 23:6–8, 16; 24:14ff.). Ultimately, this threat begins to be realized as the nation divides into two kingdoms (1 Kings 12–14; cf. 1 Kings 11:1–2; Josh 24:14ff.). The great nation promised to

⁴ Notable exceptions include Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. See, Richard Bauckham, “Reading Scripture as a Coherent Story,” in *The Art of Reading Scripture* (ed. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 38–53.

⁵ On this theme in the Torah see, David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2d ed.; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 10; New York: Bloomsbury, 1997).

Abraham (Gen 12:2) and fulfilled before entering the land (Deut 26:5) can no longer be called great. As matters deteriorate, both nations (Northern Israel and Judah) meet a sad end in exile (2 Kgs 17; 2 Kgs 25).

Within this moment of exile, Israel seeks hope in God's promise to Abraham (Isa 41:8; 51:2). The hope is that because of this promise, God will restore Israel to her former glory (Ezek 37:15–28; Isa 49:1–6; cf. Jer 27:22; Jer 30:3; 33:7; Ezek 39:25; Acts 1:8; etc.). Just as Israel never forgets the promise initially articulated to Abraham in Gen 12, the New Testament authors regularly cite God's promise to Abraham as a foundational moment that provides meaning for the whole of the biblical story (Luke 1:46–55; 67–79; Acts 3:13, 25; 7; Rom 4:13; 11:1; Gal 3:6–9, 14–18, 29; etc).

Israel, Jesus, and the Galatians

Paul's familiarity with the story of Israel and his understanding of the importance of God's promise to Abraham for the emergence and sustaining of the people of God provide the foundation for his closing salutation to the Galatian Christians as the Israel of God (6:16). The Letter to the Galatians⁶ is a written argument by Paul to address and attempt to correct a crisis in the churches of Galatia. The crisis emerged as Christian teachers or missionaries entered the Galatian churches and taught a different gospel from that of Paul. Specifically, they demanded circumcision for Gentiles who convert to the people of God (Gal 1:6–7; 3:1; 4:17; 5:2–4, 7–12; 6:12–13; cf.

⁶ On Galatians see, Louis Martyn, *Galatians* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997); Richard B. Hays, *NIB* 11:181–348; Frank J. Matera, *Galatians* (SP 9; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1992); James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (BNTC 9; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1993); David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2004), 493–526; N. T. Wright, *Galatians and Thessalonians* (Paul for Everyone; Louisville: Westminster, 2002).

Gen 17:10, 14). At the time Paul writes the letter, these missionaries were succeeding in convincing the Galatians that in order to be in the covenant people, heirs of the promise to Abraham, they must uphold the works of the law (4:8–11; cf. 3:10).⁷ Paul vehemently disagrees with this proposal (1:6; 3:1). At stake is “who are the people of God” and “upon what condition does one join the people of God.” Whereas Paul and the missionaries would agree that it is necessary to be an heir of Abraham in order to be within the people of God, Paul argues that the basis enabling a Gentile to become Abraham’s heir is not a Jewish identity marker like circumcision (Gal 2:3–12; 5:2, 6, 11; 6:12, 15; cf. 4:8–11). Rather, the basis for inclusion is the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, i.e., his death.

The importance of Jesus’ death on the cross as a cosmos-changing event cannot be underestimated. This death has changed the world from old to new, so that certain seemingly significant categories have now become nonexistent relics of an old world (6:14–15; cf. 5:6; 1:3–5; 1 Cor 7:19). The primary issue of contention in the letter, circumcision, is, in fact, a prime example of the move from the old age to the new age. Therefore, Paul explicitly highlights circumcision one final time at the close of the letter (6:15). One unified church may include uncircumcised Gentile Galatians as well as circumcised Jewish Christians. However, emphasis upon ethnic markers of identity belongs to a world that no longer exists after the death of Jesus (3:23–4:11).⁸ These categories no longer matter because when God sets the world right through the death of Jesus (1:1–5; 2:16–21), Gentiles receive the promise God made to Abram in Gen 12:1–3,⁹ are counted as descendants of Abraham (3:6–9), and live within the singular people of

⁷ Hays, 184.

⁸ Dunn, 342.

⁹ The term ‘promise’ occurs 9x in 3:14–29; cf. 4:23, 28.

God (3:14, 28–29) because of the grace of God (2:21; cf. 5:4).¹⁰ Anyone who has been crucified with Christ (2:20–21; 3:27) may not uphold the very same ethnic barriers that Jesus’ death dismantled (3:28). Further, any attempt to add a requirement to joining the covenant people is tantamount to nullification of the importance of the death of Christ (2:20–21; cf. 3:1). The death of Jesus is the sole event that makes one right before God and provides entrance into the covenant people of God (Gal 2:15–21; cf. 4:4–7).

On what condition those from differing backgrounds might enter the covenant people is of great consequence in the Letter to the Galatians. Thus, when Paul closes his letter, he addresses the entire church as the Israel of God (6:16). By using the imagery of Israel for Gentile Christians after arguing against circumcision as an entry requirement for Gentiles into the people of God, hearers are reminded of Paul’s emphasis that everyone in the covenant community is a recipient of the promise God made to Abram (Gen 12:1–3). Whereas it may sound odd for Paul to refer to Gentile Christians as Israel, his claim is that an uncircumcised Gentile may enter the covenant people of Israel as uncircumcised and should remain uncircumcised. Paul’s message is grounded in an understanding that the covenant people of God is one, that the one people begins with God’s promise to Abram, and that God’s promise to Abram will not fail. God’s promise to Abram included blessing upon the nations (Gen 12:3). Therefore, Gentile Christians should find identity with that blessing, within the people of God, within the Israel of God, only on the basis of the death of Jesus (Gal 2:16, 21; 3:14).

¹⁰ Hays, 245–48.

Questions for Discussion

1. The phrase Israel of God is used only one time in the Bible. Why do you think Paul emphasizes that Israel is “of God”?
2. Paul read the Hebrew Scriptures as more than just history. Where do you see Paul doing this in the Letter to the Galatians? Can you find examples in other New Testament writings? Can you think of texts in the New Testament that demand our familiarity with Old Testament themes or stories? How might we benefit from Paul’s method of reading the Hebrew Scriptures? Why is it important that we know the story of the whole Bible?
3. Trace the theme of promise throughout the Bible. Why do so many books of the Bible return to the theme of God’s promise to Abraham? Why does Paul rely on the theme of promise so heavily in Galatians? In what ways is it difficult in our world to believe God keeps promises? Do we have any reminders that God keeps promises? How might understanding God as one who makes promises create identity for God’s people today?
4. What is the importance of the death of Jesus in the book of Galatians? In light of this, reflect upon the meaning and implications of the phrase “crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:19) for living the Christian life.
5. In what ways does the book of Galatians and Paul’s reference to the church as the Israel of God help us think beyond ourselves as individuals and toward more communal aspects of Christian identity, practice, and obligation?