THE LITERARY ARGUMENT OF GALATIANS AND "THE ISRAEL OF GOD"

A Paper

Presented to

The Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

Annual Conference

September 16–17, 2026

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

---

by

Jason E. Coke

PhD Candidate, Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary

jasoncoke.com

THE LITERARY ARGUMENT OF GALATIANS

AND "THE ISRAEL OF GOD"

Abstract

This paper endeavors to advance dispensationalism's literal view of "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. Former studies by literalists have taken grammatical, lexical, or contextual approaches to defend "Israel" as ethnic Jews, not the church. Among literalists, however, the contextual line of reasoning is the least developed. This paper aims to supplement the contextual arguments of literalists by presenting an abridged literary argument of the book of Galatians which focuses on elements pertaining to the identity of "the Israel of God." Contrary to the conclusions of non-literalists, this paper contends that interpreting "the Israel of God" as the church does not adequately account for the context of Paul's overall argumentation in Galatians. Instead, context suggests that "the Israel of God" refers to Jewish Christians.

I. Introduction

The grammatical-historical method of discovering the authorial intent (meaning) of a text serves as the pillar of dispensational hermeneutics. Foundational to grammar is the lexical meaning of words. Regarding "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16, a hermeneutical battle exists among interpreters as to whether "Israel" refers to ethnic Jews or the Jew-Gentile church. The majority view posits that "Israel" here means the Jew-Gentile body of Christ, the church. Indeed, two of the three most popular English Bible translations in the world render this verse in a way that "Israel" means "church."[1] For the purposes of this paper, the term "non-literal" applies to those contending "Israel" means "church" in Galatians 6:16, and "literal" means those arguing "Israel" means ethnic Jews.[2]

---

[1] NIV: "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—to the Israel of God." NLT: "May God's peace and mercy be upon all who live by this principle; they are the new people of God."

[2] These labels merely apply to the word "Israel" in Galatians 6:16. No doubt the "non-literal" label may cause chagrin to some who hold to Israel as the church. For them, the *sensus literalis*—the authorially-intended meaning—of "Israel" *is* the church. In the 18th century, Johann August Ernesti built upon Augustine's teaching that words are "signs" that point to "things." Ernesti sought to "Secure the legitimate control of the *words* of Scripture

Dispensationalists (and some literalist non-dispensationalists, like Betz) have rightly challenged the non-literal view of Galatians 6:16. Both literalists and non-literalists have argued based on the categories of grammar, lexicology, context, and history in support of their respective views. Proponents of both sides have impartially admitted that grammar and lexicology, while important, do not alone resolve the debate. Hence the ensuing appeals to theology, history, and context. Among these, theological and historical arguments are the furthest removed from the text itself. Therefore, both sides largely agree that context ought to function decisively in this debate.

Yet in this writer's opinion, the least developed arguments among literalists relate to context. Conversely, non-literalists give greater focus to contextual arguments because they admit the grammar and lexicology do not favor their view. Thus, despite widespread agreement on both sides that context is the most important and determinative area of argumentation, it has received the least attention from literalists. This paper therefore endeavors to supplement the contextual line of argumentation for the literalist position.

First, this paper will offer a condensed review of the arguments from both literalists and non-literalists. Second, it will define a literary book argument and articulate its importance. Finally, it will present an abbreviated literary argument of Galatians. This literary argument is the heart of the paper and it aims to demonstrate how understanding "the Israel of God" as the

---

over the *things* themselves … That was necessary and important for Ernesti, because he genuinely believed that it was the *words* of Scripture, and not the *things*, that were divinely inspired" (John H. Sailhamer, "Johann August Ernesti: The Role of History in Biblical Interpretation," *JETS* 44 [June 2001]: 199. Italics original). For Ernesti, the grammatical sense was equivalent to the historical sense, and he called this the *sensus literalis*, or the "literal" sense. Seeking to rein in the arbitrary interpretation of *words* as *things* not signified by the *words*, he argued that a text may not have any meaning except for "Its grammatical, or historical, sense" (Sailhamer, "Ernesti," *JETS* 44, 201). Dispensationalists follow the method of Ernesti in seeking the literal sense of the words of a text according to the normal rules of grammar for the language of the text (i.e., "grammatical") at the time it was written (i.e., "historical"). The present debate concerns the *word* / *sign* "Israel" and whether it signifies ethnic Jews or the church as a *thing*.

church ignores the context of Paul's overall argumentation in the epistle. Instead, the context of Galatians as a whole suggests "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 refers to Jewish Christians.

II. Review of Arguments Concerning "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16

This section provides an abbreviated review of the grammatical, lexical, historical, and contextual approaches to understanding "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16. Non-literalists see "the Israel of God" as signifying the Jew-Gentile church. Literalists interpret "Israel" as ethnic Jews.[3] Ultimately, this section shows how the most fair-minded scholars on both sides agree that the grammar and lexicology favor the literal view. The historical argument lands in a stalemate and is ultimately unhelpful. All agree that context forms the crux of the debate.

A. Grammar and Syntax

Regarding grammar, literalists and non-literalists both agree that the most natural reading of Galatians 6:16 leads to understanding two distinct groups in the verse—Paul's Gentile audience and "the Israel of God." Douglas J. Moo serves as a contemporary representative of the non-literal view. He admits that grammatical considerations favor two groups: "Καί does not often function epexegetically; all other things being equal, we might expect it rather to be conjunctive ("peace and mercy be upon them *and* on the Israel of God") or adverbial ("Peace be

[3] Among literalists, D. Gunn has identified four major views of "the Israel of God": (1) national Israel, (2) Jewish Christians, (3) Torah-observant Hebrew Christians, and (4) Jews redeemed in the eschaton, vis-à-vis Romans 11:25–27. See David Gunn, "Two Problem Passages on Israel and the Church for Traditional Dispensationalists," (paper presented at the 2015 annual conference of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics), 16–18. See also S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "Paul and the 'Israel of God': An Exegetical and Eschatological Case Study," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 185–87, where he focuses on two of these views. Some overlap may exist between these latter three groups (those which refer to believing Jews), but all four unite together against the non-literal interpretation.

upon them and mercy *also* upon the Israel of God").”[4] He also points to the symmetrical word order which suggests two groups.[5] Nevertheless, because of his understanding of the book's context, Moo ultimately favors the rare epexegetical usage of καὶ, leading to a rendering such as: “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule—*even* to the Israel of God” (italics added—see NIV 1984, CSB, and BSB for representative translations).

Literalists counter that non-literalists force a strained grammatical reading upon Galatians 6:16 to make “Israel” mean the church. For example, S. Lewis Johnson contended that while an epexegetical translation of the third καὶ in 6:16 as “even” serves well the purposes of non-literalists, it is a rare usage of καὶ. Instead, the common adjunctive use “also” or the copulative “and” is more likely.[6] Other literalists echo Johnson's argument.[7] Regarding the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ, literalists argue that the limiting nature of the genitive identifies “the Israel of God” as a subset of national Israel.[8]

Thus, the literalist line of reasoning appeals to the “common” grammatical use as more likely than the “rare.” Objective and impartial non-literalists even agree that grammar favors the literal view. Yet any argument from grammar depends largely on grammatical probabilities, and is not, in itself, determinative of meaning.

---

[4] Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 402.

[5] Moo, *Galatians*, 402.

[6] Johnson Jr., “Paul and the ‘Israel of God,’” 187–88.

[7] See Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 143–44; Jonathan Pratt, “The ‘Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 23 (2018): 74.

[8] Pratt, “The ‘Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16,” 73.

B. Lexical Consistency

Literalists point out that in all of Paul's other letters—and indeed, the rest of Scripture—"Israel" consistently refers to ethnic Jews.[9] Johnson, Vlach, and Pratt all assert that no other example exists where the word "Israel" refers to the Jew-Gentile church.[10] Moo actually concedes, "The preponderant NT usage of 'Israel' suggests a reference to ethnic Israel,"[11] and he even includes the two debated uses in Romans 9:6 and 11:26. Some non-literalists would point to "Israel according to the flesh" (1 Cor 10:18) to support the idea of the church as a "spiritual Israel," although such a conclusion is more deductive than exegetical.[12] In any case, Moo grants that both grammatical and lexical considerations weigh in favor of the literal view. Nevertheless, Moo's understanding of the context of Galatians (see section D below) ultimately drives him finally to the non-literal position.

C. History

Closely related to arguments based on lexical consistency is the history of use for the term, "Israel." Johnson points to the lack of historical evidence for the term "Israel" ever being applied to the church until at least AD 160.[13] Yet the non-literalist simply retorts that the epistle

---

[9] Pratt, "The 'Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16," 74.

[10] See Johnson Jr., "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 188–89; Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 144–45; Pratt, "The 'Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16," 70–71.

[11] Moo, *Galatians*, 402.

[12] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 382.

[13] Johnson Jr., "Paul and the 'Israel of God,'" 191. Johnson perhaps miscategorized this argument by identifying it as a "theological" argument. It seems to the present author this is better categorized as a "historical" argument.

to the Galatians is the first Christian document applying the term "Israel" to the church.[14] The historical argument thus lands in a stalemate. Since historical usage is somewhat removed from the text itself, this line of argumentation remains ultimately unpersuasive in this debate.

D. Context

Both literalists and non-literalists agree that context is determinative for the meaning of "the Israel of God." Yet, each side appeals to the context of Galatians in support of their respective interpretations. Again representative of non-literalists, Moo argues that in Galatians Paul had abolished the Jew / Gentile distinction (Gal 3:28) and placed believing Jews and Gentiles in the same category (Gal 3:7–29; 4:28). It therefore would not suit the context that Paul should "reerect ethnic considerations by pronouncing a blessing on an "Israel" distinct from Christian believers in general."[15] Other non-literalists like Schreiner, Longenecker, and Köstenberger make similar appeals to context.[16] Moo, however, commits a category error in his analysis of the context. Paul's distinction in the benediction didn't depend on ethnicity as Moo suggests, but on adherence to his canon.[17]

Some non-literalists furthermore posit an alleged context for the benediction of Galatians 6:16 based on intertextuality with either the Old Testament or second-temple era works

---

[14] J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 33A, The Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 577.

[15] Moo, *Galatians*, 403.

[16] See Schreiner, *Galatians*, 381–83; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, vol. 41, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), 298; Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Identity of the Ἰσραηλ Του Θεου (Israel of God) in Galatians 6:16," *Faith and Mission* 19, no. 1 (2001): 4, 16–17.

[17] In Galatians, Paul's canon (rule) elevated the importance of the new creation by faith, while circumcision and uncircumcision were nothing (Gal 5:6; 6:15). This will be discussed further in section IV of this paper, the literary argument of Galatians.

such as the *Shemoneh Esreh*.[18] However, because validity in establishing an authorially-intended connection to such texts remains elusive, arguments rooted in alleged textual backgrounds do not persuade.[19]

On the other hand, literalists also contend that the context of Galatians supports their position. Ryrie, Vlach, and Burer all point to the epistle as Paul's defense against Judaizers in Galatia, thus his implicit distinguishing between Judaizers and Christian Jews who rightly accept Paul's canon.[20] While Paul had argued for equality in salvation, he did not erase ethnic distinctives. George, another literalist, furthermore addresses the oddity of Paul making a major theological point regarding the church as the "new" or "true" Israel in his concluding verses rather than in the body of the letter.[21] Why such a monumentally important announcement would occur briefly and only in the epistle's concluding benediction—without any further elaboration, and with words easily "misunderstood" as referring to ethnic Jews—remains a mystery.

E. Concluding Thoughts

Overall, fair-minded scholars on both sides recognize that grammatical and lexical arguments support the literal view. Both furthermore agree that context ultimately determines the meaning of "the Israel of God." Yet literalists have spilled far more ink on grammatical and

---

[18] See Gregory K. Beale, "Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Galatians 6:16b," *Biblica* 80, no. 2 (1999): 204–23; Martyn, *Galatians*, 565–66, 574–77; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 343–44; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 296–99.

[19] Pratt, "The 'Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16," 64–66.

[20] See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 149; Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 144; Michael H. Burer, *Galatians*, eds. Tremper Longman III, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Benjamin L. Gladd, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024), 535.

[21] Timothy George, *Galatians*, vol. 30, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 440.

lexical arguments. Non-literalist Longenecker has even charged, "All of the views that take "the Israel of God" to refer to Jews and not Gentiles … fail to take seriously enough the context of the Galatian letter itself."[22] While perhaps overstated, his critique of literalists is not entirely without warrant. Contextual arguments from the literalists cited above provide more of a general overview of the purpose of the epistle, and they scarcely receive more than a brief paragraph. Johnson's abundantly-cited and classic essay on this topic doesn't at all address the context of Galatians. By contrast, the non-literalists have written at length on the epistle's context to argue their case.

Thus, both literalists and non-literalists agree that context is the most critical and determinative area of argumentation. Yet literalists have focused their efforts on grammar and lexicology—the very place non-literalists concede the arguments, though not determinative, favor "Israel" as ethnic Jews. On the other hand, non-literalists expend most of their energy writing on the context of Galatians to support "Israel" as the church. Literalists have devoted minimal space to contextual arguments—the exact place where the battle rages the hottest and where both sides agree the debate should be settled.

By defining (section III) and presenting the literary argument of the book of Galatians (section IV), this paper therefore seeks to strengthen the contextual line of argumentation in support of the literalist view of "Israel" as ethnic Jews and "the Israel of God" as Jewish Christians.

---

[22] Longenecker, *Galatians*, 298.

III. Definition of a Literary Argument

In the Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) PhD program in Bible Exposition, a component of the program includes the completion of a "literary argument," otherwise called an "exposition," for each of the 66 books of the Bible. A Bible book argument may be defined as follows: a literary argument (or exposition) explains why and how a biblical author attempted to persuade his original audience to think or do something. It accounts for the words of the text and the literary and rhetorical devices used to persuade the audience.

Hirsch's concept of "intrinsic genre" provides the philosophical foundation for a literary argument.[23] The overall notion of communication (the book's message) governs the components of the text, and is substantiated by the text from beginning to end. Thus the parts contribute to the whole, and the whole explains the parts. The Bible book argument therefore provides an explanation of how each part of a book contributes to its message.

A literary argument (or "exposition") recognizes the following points about biblical literature.[24] First, biblical authors wrote literary works in response to a particular historical occasion. The extent to which we can validate the occasion differs from book to book. Second, the biblical author encoded in his text a message for his intended audience. Our ability to identify the original intended audience likewise varies. Third, the biblical author's message included an intended response for his original audience. This is the so-called "application" of the text. A book's exposition includes an explanation of how each section of the entire literary work

---

[23] E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 86–89.

[24] These points are gleaned from an unpublished manuscript of Dr. David Klingler, "What is Bible Exposition?," 2023. The present author has synthesized the original and supplemented it with his own thoughts. David Klingler has been the head of the BE PhD program at DTS since 2022.

contributes to the author's intended response for his original audience.[25] Fourth, the biblical author composed his literary work with strategic choices regarding grammar, lexicography, rhetoric, and literary devices. These choices and their uses differ according to literary genre, which the author also strategically selected. Fifth and finally, the biblical authors composed their texts with an awareness of canonical context. That is, all biblical literature aligns with, and is reflective of, the biblical "metanarrative."[26] In addition to the above points, it is assumed that divine inspiration played a role in all the above elements of textual composition.[27]

Thus, the literary argument (or exposition) of a biblical book attempts to explain why and how a biblical author employed his choices regarding genre, literary devices, rhetorical methods, grammar, lexicology, etc., in order to communicate a message and elicit a response from his original audience. The exposition includes sections on canonical context, historical occasion (date, location, author, and audience), genre, a proposed message statement, a proposed outline, and the actual exposition of the text. This paper will now present an abridged literary argument of Galatians. Because a complete exposition would generate excessive length, this paper will summarize the contribution of each section to the literary argument of Galatians while highlighting anything relevant to the identity of "the Israel of God" in 6:16.

---

[25] Typically, biblical authors wrote with one or two major responses in mind. Where the text has many commands (e.g., certain NT epistles), these are subordinate and they contribute to the major response(s).

[26] The term "metanarrative" is laden with baggage. Here, the term simply means the canonical context which (1) began in Genesis 1 and continues to Revelation 22, and (2) comports with reality.

[27] A defense of this assumption exceeds the bounds of this paper.

IV. The Literary Argument of Galatians

Canonical Context

Moses had commanded that resident aliens (גֵּר) in Israel receive the same rights, treatment, and duties as native citizens (אֶזְרָח) so long as they were circumcised (Exod 12:48; Lev 19:33–34; Num 15:14–16). By the first century AD, Judaism thus retained a lengthy history of Gentiles joining themselves to Israel either fully as proselytes or partially as God-fearers. The book of Acts provides abundant examples of both groups in the synagogues visited by Paul. These Gentiles held varying levels of adherence to circumcision and the Mosaic Law.

With the advent of the Christ, Jews who believed in the Messiah did not conceive of starting a new religion. In the Messiah, they had found the one who would fulfill the covenants promised to their nation. For the believing Jew, messianism (Christianity) was not a new religion but the continuation of the Jewish faith rightly understood. Jewish attitudes concerning Gentile attachment to the messianic faith would understandably be influenced by their historical means of inclusion in Israel. It therefore comes as no surprise that many believers, particularly of the more conservative Judean and Pharisaical persuasion, assumed Gentile proselytes to the incipient Christian faith should receive circumcision and keep the Law.

God uniquely gifted and appointed Paul to navigate the theological and ethnic complexity of the emergent Christian faith in areas where other apostles, such as Peter, failed. As Paul's unique contribution to the church, he described how both Jews and Gentiles should understand their relationship to the Mosaic Law and to one another in the body of Christ. Despite Paul's victory at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), Judaizing elements (whether believers or unbelievers) continued to insist that Gentiles entering the synagogue (whether it proclaimed

Christ or not) be circumcised and submit to the Law. Certain Christian Jews also insisted on the necessity of keeping the Law in addition to possessing faith in Christ.

Paul's ministry, therefore, provided much-needed clarity to the relationships between (1) Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ, and (2) Christians and the Mosaic Law. Indeed, the books of Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus all addressed Judaizing elements in the church. Only in 2 Corinthians were the Judaizers unbelievers. For those other seven epistles, Christian believers espoused the antagonistic theology of Lawkeeping. Thus, of Paul's thirteen epistles, eight directly addressed the issue of Christians being impacted by Lawkeeping Jews. Among the general epistles, Jewish Lawkeeping also formed the central problem in both Hebrews and James.

The relationship between Law, Christians, and suffering produced much conflict and confusion in first-century Christianity. That Jewish believers in the Galatian church impelled Lawkeeping among Gentile believers served as a microcosm of the broader debate in first-century Christianity regarding Mosaic Law and the Christian. Paul's letter to the Galatians is representative of his position on the issue and of his unique apostolic role which provided critical direction for the church universal.

Historical Occasion

Who?

According to the text, Paul authored the letter (1:1) and insisted that he wrote at least a portion of it with his own hand (6:11). He included, "and all the brothers with me" (1:2) among the senders of the epistle. These brothers were probably Jewish believers aligned with Paul's canon (i.e., they were *not* Judaizers). They didn't necessarily contribute to authorship of the

letter, but he mentioned them for rhetorical effect—extensive use of the first-person plural pronoun "we" adds weight to Paul's position since not only was he appointed by God as an apostle, but he also had the support of other Jewish believers. It is not implausible that the "we" group included, at a minimum, the apostles and their ministry associates. Subsequent sections will expound more on the "we" group in Galatians.

Where and When?

For Paul's epistle to the Galatians, the questions of audience, location, and date are all intertwined. Paul addressed this epistle to "the churches of Galatia" (1:2), but scholars debate whether this refers to the southern Galatians or the northern Galatians.[28] Proponents of each view espouse numerous arguments in their favor. This author finds the southern Galatian theory slightly more compelling overall, thus leading to a probable date of composition in the late 40s, possibly AD 48. Critically, however, the destination (southern or northern Galatia) and date do not impact the meaning, message, or intended response of Paul's letter. The epistle itself provides sufficient information to understand the problem in the Galatian churches as well as Paul's intended solution. For the purposes of this paper, nevertheless, it is assumed that Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia ca. AD 48. Paul's location at the time of writing is unknown.

To Whom?

Paul affirmed his audience as sons of God by faith (3:26; also 4:6), baptized into Christ (3:27), and having put on Christ (3:28). Thus, Paul wrote to a believing Christian audience. For several reasons, the audience must be Gentile. First, the occasion of the epistle

---

[28] For a fuller discussion of issues around the southern and northern Galatian theories, see D. A. Carson, and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 458–65.

demands a Gentile audience: it makes no sense that Jewish believers would attempt to circumcise other Jewish believers to avoid persecution from Jewish unbelievers (6:12) because Jews (whether believers or not) were already circumcised. Second, Paul's description of his audience's pre-Christian life (4:8) reveals their Gentile heritage. Third, Paul's switch between first- and second-person pronouns contrasts Jews and Gentiles. For example, to the Jews, the Law became "our" guardian (3:24), something never true of Gentiles. "We" (the Jews) were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world (4:3), but received the adoption as sons while being redeemed from under the Law (4:5). Gentiles never needed redemption from under the Law. By contrast, "you" (plural) the Gentiles never knew God and were enslaved to things not gods (4:8), and only now through Paul's gospel had come to know God (4:9). A Gentile audience furthermore aligns with Paul's apostolic ministry to the Gentiles. Thus, Paul wrote to believing Gentiles in the churches of Galatia.

Why?

Below, Table 1 identifies the characteristics and situation of the believing Jewish antagonists in Galatia, and Table 2, of the Gentile believers in Galatia. Taken together, these tables help reconstruct the occasion for which Paul wrote this epistle. A summary of the historical occasion prompting Paul to write Galatians follows these tables.

Table 1: Characteristics and situation of the believing Jewish antagonists in Galatia

Disturbed / unsettled / caused confusion for the Gentile audience	1:7
Distorted the gospel of Christ	1:7
Proclaimed a gospel contrary to Paul's	1:8
Man-pleasers	1:10
Hypocritical (implied)[29]	2:12–14

[29] Paul included a retelling of the situation in Antioch in Galatians because of the parallels to the situation in Galatia. In both cases, Jewish believers (Peter and Barnabas in Antioch; the antagonists in Galatia) compromised concerning Christians and the Mosaic Law due to pressure from a circumcision party.

Transgressors	2:18
Declared invalid the grace of God	2:21
Bewitched the Gentile audience	3:1
Zealously sought the Gentile audience, but not for good	4:17
Hindered the Gentile audience from obeying the truth	5:7
Leavened the whole batch of dough	5:9
Confused the Gentile audience	5:10
Will bear a judgment	5:10
Preached circumcision	5:11
Upset / troubled the Gentile audience	5:12
Bit and devoured the Gentile audience	5:15
The Law proclaimed their sins	5:19–21
Conceited	5:26
Caught in a trespass	6:1
Thought themselves something when they are nothing	6:3
Sowed to the flesh and reaped corruption	6:8
Compelled the Gentile audience to circumcision	6:12
Tried to avoid persecution from unbelieving Jews because of their association with uncircumcised Gentiles	6:12
Did not keep the Law themselves	6:13
Wanted to circumcise the Gentile audience to boast in their flesh	6:13
Could have peace and mercy if they accepted Paul's canon that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing	6:15–16

Table 2: Characteristics and situation of the believing Gentile audience

Turned away from Paul's gospel to another "gospel"	1:6
Being disturbed / unsettled / confused by the believing Jewish antagonists	1:7
Knew of Paul's former life as a Pharisee	1:13
Bewitched	3:1
Foolish to think the flesh could complete what the Spirit began	3:3
Sons of God through faith	3:26
Baptized into Christ	3:27
Have put on Christ	3:28
Sons of God	4:6
No longer slaves, but heirs	4:7
Formerly did not know God	4:8
Formerly enslaved to things which are not gods	4:8
Know God and known by God	4:9
Considering turning away from God and back to slavery to the elemental things	4:9
Already kept certain Jewish laws	4:10
Children of promise	4:28
Desire to be under the Law	4:21
Considering circumcision	5:2
Attempting to be justified by the Law	5:4
Had previously followed Paul's gospel of righteousness by faith	5:7

Paul explained the problem among the churches of Galatia in a single verse: "As many as are wanting to make a good showing in the flesh, these are attempting to compel you to be circumcised, only so that they will not be persecuted for the cross of Christ" (6:12).[30] That is, the situation in Galatia involved three distinct parties: Jewish believers, Jewish unbelievers, and Gentile believers. Because of their association with Gentile believers, the Jewish believers faced persecution at the hands of unbelieving Jews. Throughout Jewish history, Gentiles could integrate into Israel by submitting to circumcision and the Mosaic Law. But now, believing Jews associated with uncircumcised believing Gentiles in the church, and this drew the ire of unbelieving Jews and led to Jew-on-Jew persecution. To avoid such persecution "for the cross of Christ," the believing Jews therefore pushed the believing Gentiles to submit to circumcision and Lawkeeping.

As detailed above in Table 1, these believing Jewish antagonists were Judaizers who disturbed (1:7; 5:12), bewitched (3:1), and confused (5:10) the believing Gentile audience by preaching circumcision (5:11; 6:12) and hindering them from obeying the truth (5:7). Because they distorted Paul's gospel (1:7–8) by zealously seeking Gentile circumcision (4:17; 6:12, 13), Paul considered them conceited (5:26; 6:3) man-pleasers (1:10) and hypocritical (2:12–14) transgressors (2:18; 6:1) of the Law which even they didn't keep (6:13).

But Paul didn't limit his anger to the Judaizing antagonists alone. Although the believing Gentile audience (see Table 2) had previously followed Paul's gospel of righteousness by faith (5:7), they now followed certain Jewish laws (4:10). At the behest of the antagonists, the Gentile audience apparently sought righteousness through circumcision (5:2) and Lawkeeping (4:21; 5:4). Yet Paul chastised them for turning away from his gospel to another (1:6),

---

[30] The language of 6:12 is difficult to explain if the antagonists were not believers.

considering them foolish (3:3) and bewitched (3:1). Paul warned that the hypocritical Judaizers would bear judgment (5:10) for misleading them. However, he hoped the Gentiles would humbly restore them (6:1). If the Jewish antagonists (and the Gentile audience) followed Paul's canon that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything (5:6; 6:15), then peace and mercy would be theirs (6:16).

Ultimately, Paul wanted the believing Jews and believing Gentiles to agree with his gospel of grace that life and righteousness come through the Spirit by faith, and not by the Law. He wanted both groups to abandon their Lawkeeping efforts and accept his canon that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but a new creation given life through the Spirit by faith (5:6; 6:16).

Paul's trichotomous distinction among Jews

Related to the historical occasion, and also critical to the identity of "the Israel of God" in 6:16 is the recognition that in Galatians, Paul employed a trichotomous distinction among Jews: (1) unbelieving Jews, (2) believing Judaizers, and (3) believing Jews who followed Paul's canon. First, the unbelieving Jews included the majority in Israel who rejected the Messiah and kept the Mosaic Law. In Galatia, this group persecuted the epistle's believing Jewish antagonists. Second, the believing Judaizers included Jews who sought righteousness from the Law, Judaized others, and disregarded Paul's canon.[31] This group constitutes the epistle's antagonists—their persecution at the hands of unbelieving Jews led to their Judaizing efforts among the Gentile Christians. These Christian Jews roused Paul's fury because their actions identified them with unbelieving Israel (the first group) and impeded the advancement of

[31] The believing Pharisees at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 would also fit in this category.

his “Lawless” gospel of grace. The third group included Jews like Paul and “the brethren with him” who recognized that righteousness came from faith and not from works of the Law. These Jewish believers did not keep the Law themselves, did not impose it on anyone (Jew or Gentile), and they adhered to Paul’s canon.

In Galatians, Paul posited two outcomes for the believing Jewish antagonists (the second group). Continuing to adhere to the Law and impose it upon Gentiles would identify them with the first group (unbelieving Israel) and so keep them under Paul’s curse (1:8–9). Alternatively, they could agree with Paul’s canon and receive the blessing (6:15–16). This paper contends that “the Israel of God” includes all believing Jews (the second and third groups mentioned above). Galatians leaves an open-ended question as to whether “the Israel of God” in Galatia would act in line with their identity (i.e., follow Paul’s canon) and receive the blessing, or act like unbelieving Israel (i.e., flout Paul’s canon) and remain under the curse.

Paul ultimately desired the second group of Jews (Judaizing believers) in Galatia to live out their true identity as “the Israel of God.” To that end, Paul would employ the Gentile believers in Galatia. In his epistle, he intended to convince his Gentile audience to agree with his gospel canon (1:1–5:15) and then live by it (5:16–6:16). Part of living out that canon included the humble correction of the Jewish antagonists who contradicted it (6:1–16). Should the Jewish antagonists accept the correction and adhere to Paul’s canon, they would receive the blessing of peace and mercy alongside the Gentile audience (6:15–16).

Proposed Message Statement

In order to address Gentile believers seeking circumcision and Lawkeeping at the behest of Jewish believers in the churches of Galatia who feared persecution from Jewish unbelievers for their association with uncircumcised Gentiles, the Apostle Paul from an unknown location wrote an epistle to the churches in Galatia in order to explain his gospel of grace, that righteousness and life come from the Spirit by faith and not by works of the Law, so that both Jewish and Gentile parties would agree with Paul's gospel of grace and its associated canon that circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing, but a new creation given life through the Spirit by faith.

Use of Rhetoric in Galatians

The study of rhetoric in Galatians is important because, like all biblical books, Galatians is ultimately a *persuasive* literary work. Identifying the means of persuasion helps articulate the argument of each book. While the field of rhetoric is highly developed and complex, some basic rhetorical categories are included here.

Classical rhetoric employs three modes and three species of rhetoric. The three modes of rhetoric include *logos*,[32] *pathos*,[33] and *ethos*.[34] The three species include judicial,[35] epideictic,[36]

---

[32] *Logos* employs logical arguments intended to appeal to rational principles found within the author's discourse.

[33] *Pathos* employs arguments intended to arouse an emotional reaction and play upon the audience's feelings.

[34] *Ethos* employs appeals on the basis of credibility: good character or authority.

[35] With judicial rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade his audience to make a judgment about events that occurred in the past. This judgment often deals with questions of truth or justice, and can be positive (a defense or "apology" of correctness / innocence) or negative (a prosecution, emphasizing guilt).

[36] With epideictic rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade his audience to hold or reaffirm a certain point of view in the present time. The author wants to increase (or decrease / undermine) his audience's assent to a certain value or belief. To this end, epideictic rhetoric will frequently use examples of praise and blame.

and deliberative[37] rhetoric.[38] As will be demonstrated in the exposition below, Galatians is a primarily deliberative literary work wherein Paul desired his audience to take action in the near future. In service of his deliberative purpose, Paul employed a variety of ethical (*ethos*), emotional (*pathos*), and logical (*logos*) appeals.

As brief examples, Paul appealed to his appointment by God as an apostle and to the heavenly source of his gospel in order to bolster his authority to proclaim the true gospel (*ethos*). He called the Galatians "foolish" and "bewitched," and he inserted passionate personal pleas designed to jolt his audience and tug their emotions so they would listen to him (*pathos*). He also pointed out the illogical nature of their present course of action: given the Galatians' former enslavement (to paganism) and their newfound freedom once they received Paul and his gospel, their subsequent desire for a return to slavery under Jewish Law wasn't a logical choice (*logos*).

All of Paul's rhetorical appeals contributed to his overall deliberative purpose that Gentile and Jewish believers in the Galatian churches accept and live by his canon which flowed naturally from his gospel of grace. If Paul's Gentile audience abstained from circumcision, abandoned their Lawkeeping efforts, and humbly corrected the Jewish antagonists in their churches, then both groups (Jewish and Gentile believers) would come to the point where they agreed with Paul's canon and lived by it. As a result, peace and mercy would be theirs rather than the anathema (curse) of adding the Law to grace.

---

[37] With deliberative rhetoric, the author seeks to persuade the audience to take (or not take) some action in the (often near) future. Deliberative rhetoric deals with questions of self-interest and future benefits for the audience, and appears in the form of exhortation (positive) or warning (negative).

[38] For a complete discussion of classical rhetoric in biblical studies, see George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation through Rhetorical Criticism*, Studies in Religion (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

Proposed Outline

I. Agree with Paul's gospel canon … (1:1–5:15)
    A. Because of Paul's authority … (1:1–2:21)
        1. As an Apostle of God (1:1–5)
        2. To anathematize any other gospel (1:6–10)
        3. Having received the gospel from heaven, not men (1:11–24)
        4. Having victoriously confronted the same error before (2:1–21)
    B. Because Paul's gospel is correct … (3:1–29)
        1. Based on the Galatians' own salvation experience (3:1–5)
        2. Based on Abraham's pre-Law salvation experience (3:6–29)
    C. Because disagreement means slavery … (4:1–5:1)
        1. From which Jewish believers were already redeemed (4:1–7)
        2. And the Galatians had already accepted freedom (4:8–20)
        3. And free Israel contrasts with enslaved Israel (4:21–5:1)
    D. Because of its superior outcomes (5:2–15)
II. Live out Paul's gospel canon … (5:16–6:16)
    A. By walking by the Spirit (5:16–26)
    B. By correcting those who contradict the canon (6:1–6:16)
III. Closing greetings (6:17–18)

Proposed Exposition of Galatians

This exposition follows the structure of the outline proposed above. All parenthetical verse references are from Galatians unless otherwise noted. First, Paul argued that his Gentile audience should agree with his gospel canon (1) because of Paul's authority (1:1–2:21), (2) because Paul's gospel is correct (3:1–29), (3) because disagreement means slavery (4:1–5:1), and (4) because of its superior outcomes (5:2–15). Second, they should live out that canon by (1) walking by the Spirit (5:16–26), and (2) correcting those who contradict it (6:1–16).

I.A.1 Agree with Paul's gospel canon

because of Paul's authority as an apostle of God (1:1–5)

To elicit agreement with his gospel canon, Paul's introduction bolstered his authority to declare the true and "Lawless" apostolic gospel of salvation by faith and to declare his canon concerning circumcision and uncircumcision (*ethos*).

First, Paul's divine approval as an apostle of Christ imparted divine authority and approval of him and his message. His declaration also tacitly attacked the believing Jewish antagonists: whereas God appointed Paul as an authorized apostle (*ethos*), mere men had appointed the Judaizing antagonists (1:1). The epistle's first sentence thus initiates the concept of a distinction among believing Jews. The letter will develop this dichotomy as either rejection or acceptance of Paul's canon. Rejection meant identifying with unbelieving Israel and being placed under the curse (1:8–9), while adherence would result in the blessing of peace and mercy (6:16).

Second, the senders of the epistle included Paul "and all the brethren with [him]" (1:2). Including "all the brethren with [Paul]" in the introduction (1) adds further weightiness to Paul's words and authority (*ethos*), and (2) serves to define the group identified with first-person

plural pronouns (we / our). While first-person plurals in Galatians refer to Paul and the brethren with him, second-person pronouns (and verbs) in the epistle refer to the believing Gentile audience in Galatia ("grace to you" [1:3]; "you are turning away … the one who called you" [1:6]; "some who are disturbing you" [1:7], etc.).[39] This paper contends that Paul used these pronouns consistently throughout the epistle.[40]

While the exact identity of the "brethren with Paul" is unknown, one may safely infer they were Christian Jews who did not place themselves or others under the Law. In other words, the "we" group constituted the third group of Jews—believers who adhered to Paul's canon. This conclusion arises from the following observations. First, it would make no rhetorical sense for Paul to appeal to a group "with him" unless they agreed with his views concerning the gospel and the Law. Second, select claims Paul made of the "we" group in the text include the following: "we are Jews by nature" (2:15), "we have believed in Christ Jesus" (2:16), "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law" (3:13), "we were detained under the Law" (3:23), and "the Law became our guardian until Christ" (3:24). Accordingly, the "we" group in Galatians cannot include Gentiles, unbelievers, or Judaizers. Rather, the "we" group must be constituted by Paul and other Jewish believers—quite plausibly the other apostles and their ministry associates—who agreed with his canon concerning circumcision and uncircumcision.

Third, Paul's mentioning of the "present evil age" (1:4) refers to the age of Jewish rejection (cf. Deut 32:21; Rom 10:19–21; 11:15, 25). Because the Jewish majority rejected the Messiah and still followed the Law, mention of this evil age would prepare Paul's Gentile

---

[39] In Greek, these second-person pronouns are plural.

[40] A *possible* exception to this occurs in Galatians 2:9 where the context of Paul's story clearly identifies "we" as Paul and Barnabas. Nevertheless, Paul may well have intended to include Barnabas in the epistle's "we" group of Jewish believers who follow Paul's canon.

audience to react negatively against the imposition of Jewish Law upon their Christian life. That Christ gave himself to rescue "us" (1:4, speaking of Paul and the brethren with him among the Jewish remnant) drew a distinction between the Jewish believers with Paul and unbelieving Israel. That unbelieving Israel kept the Law yet didn't have life should concern the believing Gentiles because believing Jews (the second group) imposed that very same Law upon them. Paul's use of unbelieving Israel in Galatians is also highly relevant to defining "the Israel of God." His contention will be that by following the Law, the believing Jewish antagonists and the Gentile audience were identifying with, or acting like, unbelieving Israel and therefore risked subjection to Paul's curse (1:8–9). Instead, Paul intended believing Jews (the Israel of God) and believing Gentiles to follow his canon (not placing themselves under the Law) in order to experience the blessing of peace and mercy (6:16).

I.A.2 Agree with Paul's gospel canon

because of Paul's authority to anathematize any other gospel (1:6–10)

Paul's shock that his Gentile audience would turn away from his gospel and its associated canon demonstrates that *believers* may set themselves against Paul's canon based on their Lawkeeping efforts. In the epistle, this would include both the believing Gentile audience and the believing Jewish antagonists. The Gentile audience sought to win favor with the believing Judaizers just as the Judaizers did so with unbelieving Jews by circumcising the Gentiles in order to avoid persecution (6:12). Both were man-pleasers in their attempts to keep the Law, rather than striving to please God (1:10) by faith. The Jewish antagonists were the ones "disturbing you [the Gentile audience] and wanting to distort the gospel of Christ [via Lawkeeping]" (1:7). The double anathema placed on such believers (1:8–9) contrasts with the conditional blessing based on adherence to Paul's canon (6:15–16) and establishes a fear-based

emotional appeal for why the audience should accept the canon (*pathos*). Paul and the brethren with him were Jewish believers assenting to the canon. By contrast, the believing Jewish antagonists (the Judaizers) rejected that canon. Both constituted "the Israel of God," but only Paul's group—along with any Judaizers who repented (6:1) and joined it—could receive the conditional blessing.

I.A.3 Agree with Paul's gospel canon

because of Paul's authority having received the gospel from heaven, not men (1:11–24)

Paul's biographical testimony and the testimony of the Judean churches about Paul both point to the heavenly source of Paul's "Lawless" gospel. Not that Paul was naturally inclined toward a gospel of grace; the description of his former life as a Pharisee highlighted his own zeal for the Mosaic Law. Paul had loved the Law and lived it out (1:13–14). He most of anyone would be apt to promote the Law, especially among Jewish Christians. Yet Paul's gospel sourced in heaven did not require Christians to follow the Law (*ethos*).

I.A.4 Agree with Paul's gospel canon

because of Paul's authority having victoriously confronted the same error before (2:1–21)

Paul demonstrated that whether in Jerusalem (2:1–10) or Antioch (2:11–21), and whether confronting ordinary men (2:1–6) or leading apostles (2:6–21), he consistently resisted and corrected Judaizing influences in the early church with the gospel of grace. Paul's examples furthermore show that among believing Israelites—including leading apostles—there were both Lawkeepers and the "Lawless." This distinction advances Paul's notion begun in the introduction that there exist two groups within believing Israel. Depending on behavior in relation to the Law, an individual could transition between groups.

Paul's historical / biographical examples (2:1–21) thus served to demonstrate (1) Paul's authority to declare the correct gospel as accepted by the other apostles, (2) that the gospel is of grace, not of Law, and (3) that Paul had already successfully opposed Judaizing elements in the church, including Peter as the leading apostle (*ethos*). Therefore, his correction of the Galatian error was nothing new. Paul had remedied the same problem multiple times before, and he furthermore held the requisite authority from God and the endorsement of the other apostles to correct the erroneous Judaizers in Galatia (*ethos*).

I.B.1 Agree with Paul's gospel canon because Paul's gospel is correct based on the Galatians' own salvation experience (3:1–5)

Paul's berating of the Galatians and his series of rhetorical questions pointed out the logical absurdity and foolishness of mixing Law and Spirit based on the Galatians' own salvation experience (*logos*). They had been saved not by works of the Law, but by faith.

I.B.2 Agree with Paul's gospel canon because Paul's gospel is correct based on Abraham's pre-Law salvation experience (3:6–29)

Paul continued arguing for the correctness of his gospel of grace, this time based on the pre-Law salvation experience of Abraham, who was declared righteous by faith. By quoting Habakkuk (3:11), Paul showed that even once Moses delivered the Law, "having life" (i.e., salvation) was still by faith, for a new law did not nullify a previous covenant (3:15–18). Thus, whether before the Law or during the Law, righteousness always came from faith, not from the Law (*logos*).

In Paul's day, Christ had redeemed "us" (Paul and the Jewish brethren with him) from the curse of the Law (3:13). Anyone (Jew or Gentile) could, by faith, be blessed (3:9) as a

son of Abraham (3:7). On the other hand, any who sought righteousness through the Law faced a curse (3:10). The Law could not provide life (3:21), but merely pointed to the Christ who did (3:19–25). Indeed, the Law identified transgression (3:19–20) and detained "us" (Paul and the Jewish brethren with him) until "we" were declared righteous by faith in Christ (3:22–25). Once Christ came, the Law was no longer necessary (3:25), but faith (3:22, 24) which identified one as a son of God (3:26). Abrahamic sonship, life, and righteousness came for anyone (3:28) by faith, not Law.

In this section, Paul therefore continued to contrast the two groups of believing Jews. He cursed those who kept the Law (3:10; cf. 1:8–9) and blessed those who, by agreeing with his canon, did not (3:9; cf. 6:15–16). Jewish believers (or the Gentile audience, for that matter) who sought righteousness through works of the Law identified themselves with unbelieving Israel and remained under the same curse of the Law as them. Conversely, Paul and the Jewish brethren with him were declared righteous by faith and not through works of the Law.

I.C Agree with Paul's gospel canon because disagreement means slavery (4:1–5:1)

Paul argued that disagreement with his gospel and its associated canon meant slavery under the Law. This inferior outcome constituted a logical argument why the Gentile audience should not submit to the Law (*logos*). The entire section (4:1–5:1) is governed by the concluding command, "Stand firm, therefore, and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1) by which he meant the Galatian Gentiles should not place themselves under the Law. Paul argued his point in three major moves.

I.C.1 Agree with Paul's gospel canon because disagreement means slavery from which Jewish believers were already redeemed (4:1–7)

First, he argued that the Jewish remnant had already been set free from the curse and slavery of the Law (4:1–7). "We" (Paul and the Jewish brethren with him) had been enslaved by the Law (4:1–3) but the Son had redeemed them from under the Law (4:4–5) so they might be adopted as sons (4:5–6). Gentiles could likewise participate in this sonship not by Lawkeeping, but by faith (4:7).[41]

I.C.2 Agree with Paul's gospel canon because disagreement means slavery and the Galatians had already accepted freedom (4:8–20)

Second, Paul pointed out how the Galatians' current desire to be under the Law risked a return to slavery from the freedom they had already accepted. The Galatian Gentiles had welcomed Paul and his gospel of grace, receiving the incumbent freedom from their former slavery. So great was their gratitude that they would do anything for him. But now by following the Judaizers, they treated Paul like an enemy and threatened the freedom they had so willingly accepted from him. Because submitting to the Law risked their relationship with Paul and their freedom in Christ, Paul wanted the Galatians to recognize the illogical nature of their trajectory toward the Law (*logos*).

I.C.3 Agree with Paul's gospel canon because disagreement means slavery and free Israel contrasts with enslaved Israel (4:21–5:1)

Third, Paul's allegories of Abraham's two wives, two sons, and two Jerusalems demonstrated the differences between free Israel (Paul and the Jewish brethren with him) and

---

[41] Paul had previously made the same point about Abrahamic sonship in 3:7.

enslaved Israel (unbelieving Jews and the believing Judaizers). Paul's tripartite distinction among Jews comes to the forefront here.[42] The Hagar-Ishmael-slave-Jerusalem-of-now image representing Jews under the Law contrasted with the Sarah-Isaac-son-free-Jerusalem-above signifying Jews free of the Law. The allegory demonstrated how the Judaizers in the Galatian churches—although believers in Christ—aligned themselves with unbelieving Israel and its associated slavery to the Law.

All three of the appeals in this section (4:1–5:1) point to the Law as slavery, so contributing to Paul's argument that the Gentile believers in Galatia should agree with Paul's gospel of grace and its associated canon. The believing Judaizers in Galatia were acting like enslaved unbelieving Israel, and the Gentiles considered following suit.[43]

I.D Agree with Paul's gospel canon

because of its superior outcomes (5:2–15)

To elicit agreement with his gospel canon, Paul contrasted the negative outcomes of slavery to the Law with the positive outcomes of freedom in Christ. The contrasting results constituted a logical argument for agreeing with Paul's canon (*logos*). For believers who strove for righteousness through Lawkeeping, the following would apply. Christ did not benefit them (5:2), they became bound to the whole Law (5:3), estranged from Christ and "of grace, fallen" (5:4), disobedient to the truth (5:7), alienated from Paul who brought salvation to them (5:8), and they bit and devoured one another (5:15). Of the believing Jewish antagonists influencing the

---

[42] The three groups are (1) unbelieving Jews, (2) believing Judaizers, and (3) believing Jews who followed Paul's canon.

[43] Paul's identification of the Gentile audience as children of promise like Isaac (4:28) does not introduce a new ethnic identity of believing Gentiles as Israel. It reinforces Paul's earlier mention of the Gentile believers as sons of Abraham by faith (3:7) and sons of God by faith (3:26).

believing Gentile audience toward circumcision, a penalty was owed (5:10), and Paul desired their being "cut off" (5:12).

On the other hand, "we" (Paul and the brethren with him) awaited the hope of righteousness by faith and through the Spirit (5:5). The Galatians could share in this hope through agreement with Paul's canon that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but faith working through love (5:6). Instead of biting and devouring one another under the Law (5:15), the Galatians' call to freedom (5:13) would achieve the purpose of serving one another in love (5:14). Ironically, by loving one another in this freedom, they *would* fulfill the Law (5:14) which was their desire in the first place. Thus, the contrasting paths with their respective outcomes function to persuade the Gentile audience to accept Paul's canon and avoid their Lawkeeping efforts.

In relation to "the Israel of God," this section continues to portray Paul's distinction among Jewish believers. Those who ignore Paul's canon and follow the Law reap the negative consequences, while those like Paul and "the brethren with him" experience freedom and blessing. Such a distinction prepares the audience to understand the conditional blessing in 6:16 for Jewish believers ("the Israel of God") who also follow Paul's canon.

II. Live out Paul's gospel canon (5:16–6:16)

Having presented his four major arguments as to why the Galatians should agree with his gospel of grace and his associated canon (1:1–5:15), and convinced of their agreement (5:10), Paul then commanded the Galatians to live out his gospel canon (5:16–6:16) by doing two things. First, the Galatians should themselves walk by the Spirit (5:16–26), and second, the Galatians should correct those who contradict the canon (6:1–16). If obeyed, these instructions

would resolve the problem in Galatia as both Jewish and Gentile believers experienced the blessings associated with freedom from the Law.

II.A Live out Paul's gospel canon

by walking by the Spirit (5:16–26)

Paul's description of the opposition between the flesh and the Spirit contrasts believers seeking righteousness by works of the Law with those seeking righteousness by faith. Indeed, this issue is central to the entire epistle. Critical to the interpretation of this section is Paul's equating of "flesh" with "works of the Law" (3:2–3; cf. 6:12). The desire of the flesh (5:16) is to seek righteousness by works of the Law.[44] The "deeds of the flesh" (5:19–21) point to the inevitable results of Lawkeeping. In other words, the Law revealed that those under it (who cannot possibly keep it) were sexually immoral, unclean, idolatrous, etc. Unbelieving Israel was under the Law and would not inherit the kingdom of God (5:21). Thus, for those who have life by the Spirit, submission to the Law ran contrary to their nature. Furthermore, whereas the Mosaic Law prohibited the sins listed as deeds of the flesh, no law prohibited the fruit of the Spirit (5:23). The listed deeds of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit generate antithetical emotional responses (revulsion and fear versus attraction and comfort) thus serving as an emotional appeal (*pathos*) to persuade the audience to live out Paul's canon, equivalent to walking by the Spirit.

Since those in Christ have already crucified the flesh (5:24)—the desire to keep the Law—"we" (Paul and the believing Jewish brethren with him who do not keep the Law, but trust in Paul's gospel of grace and his canon) have life by the Spirit and follow the Spirit (5:25). Walking by the Spirit (5:16), having life by the Spirit (5:25), and conforming to / following the

---

[44] No one in the context of the Galatian epistle—unbelieving Jews, believing Jews, or believing Gentiles—took a libertine view that argued in favor of licentiousness.

Spirit (5:25) are all synonymous with following Paul's gospel of grace and his canon that circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.

Like so much of the epistle, this section continues contrasting acceptance and rejection of Paul's canon. Those who seek righteousness through Lawkeeping (i.e., they follow the lust of the flesh) are actually condemned by the Law and so align themselves with unbelieving Israel which will not inherit the kingdom. Such alignment would apply to the believing Judaizers in Galatia and the Gentile audience should they continue on their path to Lawkeeping. On the other hand, those who walk by the Spirit apart from the Law (like Paul and the brethren with him) exhibit the fruit of the Spirit. Paul's exhortation that the Gentiles in Galatia walk by the Spirit sets them up as the "spiritual ones" who will correct the Jewish believers caught in the sin of Judaizing (6:1).

II.B Live out Paul's gospel canon
by correcting those who contradict it (6:1–16)

Paul's commands pursuant to his Gentile audience living out his gospel canon by correcting those who contradict it would resolve the problem among the believing Jewish antagonists. Here, the benefits of following Paul's canon are emotionally appealing (*pathos*) and provide superior outcomes (*logos*) because adherents fall under the blessing of peace and mercy (6:16) rather than the curse (1:8–9; 3:10).

The "spiritual ones" (the Gentiles who walk by the Spirit and not by the deeds of the flesh, equivalent to Lawkeeping) should correct and restore the ones caught in a trespass—the Judaizing believers of Galatia attempting to keep the Law and impose it upon the Gentiles (6:1). The imperatives (restore [6:1], carry [6:2], examine [6:4], share [6:6], don't be deceived [6:7]) and explanatory phrases of 6:1–10 are connected by a series of conjunctions. The grammar

therefore does not allow these commands to depart from the existing context.[45] They all relate to the relationship of the Galatian Gentiles and Judaizing believers to Paul's gospel canon. Paul intended that his "good"—defined as the gospel of grace and its associated canon—win the day in Galatia.[46]

Confident of the Gentiles' agreement (5:10), Paul wanted them to correct the believing Jews and so resolve the problems in the Galatian churches. The remaining tension in Galatia pertained to the choice of the Judaizing believers. Would they accept the correction of the Gentiles and receive the blessing (6:16)? Or would they continue their Lawkeeping (although not really, 6:13) and thus identify with unbelieving Israel and remain under the curse?

Such tension has appeared throughout the entire epistle with Paul's trichotomous differentiation among Jews. This distinction sets up the reader to understand "the Israel of God" in 6:16 without difficulty. Restating his canon (6:15), the conditional blessing of peace and mercy would come upon "as many as will follow this canon" and upon "the Israel of God" (6:16).[47] With Paul's certainty of the Gentiles' adherence to his canon (5:10), the question at hand is whether believing Jews ("the Israel of God") will continue seeking righteousness through Lawkeeping and therefore be subject to Paul's curse, or live out the freedom they have in Christ apart from the Law and so receive the blessing. In other words, will the believing Jewish

---

[45] For example, sharing in all good with the one who teaches (6:6) is not about paying pastors generously (even if we pastors might *wish* it to be so). Paul was the teacher, and the Galatians, the ones taught. His "good" was already defined as Christ being fully formed in them (4:18–19) whereas the "not good" was Lawkeeping (4:17).

[46] See previous footnote for explanation.

[47] This paper asserts that the grammar most reasonably points to two groups. In context, the groups are believing Gentiles and believing Jews.

antagonists live out their identity as the Israel of God? Or will they identify with unbelieving Israel through adherence to the Law?

Why "Israel of God" as the church fails in the context of Galatians

Given the context of Paul's argument throughout the epistle, at least four significant problems emerge if "the Israel of God" means the church.

First, the benediction becomes logically incoherent with the single-group view. How could peace and mercy be offered exclusively to those who follow Paul's canon, and at the same time to the church universal—which includes Judaizing believers who do not follow the canon? The conditional nature of the blessing is restrictive based on adherence to the canon, while understanding "the Israel of God" as the church would then extend the blessing to Christians whom the epistle itself portrays as contradicting that canon.

Second, it causes the believing Jewish antagonists to vanish as a distinct referent at precisely the rhetorical climax and resolution of the entire epistle. Paul was already confident of the Gentile audience's agreement with him (5:10). The remaining tension is whether the Judaizers will accept correction and follow Paul's canon. Thus, at the very point of the epistle's resolution, the unresolved Jewish party disappears if "the Israel of God" indeed means the entire church.

Third (and related to the second point), the epistle's conclusion would introduce a new ecclesiological identification while failing to conclude the established argument. Paul ostensibly delivered a monumentally important declaration that the Jew-Gentile church constitutes "Israel." While Paul had indeed pointed in the epistle to Gentiles as sons of Abraham, sons of God, and heirs of the promise, these do not establish the proposition that believing Gentiles or the church as a whole are now Israel. Meanwhile, the crucial question flowing from

the entire argument of Galatians—whether the Judaizers in Galatia will adhere to Paul's canon—disappears.

Fourth, understanding "the Israel of God" as the church collapses the trichotomous distinction among Jews which Paul had used pervasively in the epistle. Paul's Jewish triad included unbelieving Israel, believing Judaizers, and Paul's party of Jewish believers who follow his canon. The remaining tension is whether the believing Judaizers would identify with unbelieving Israel through Lawkeeping and so place themselves under the curse, or follow Paul's canon and receive the blessing. Understanding "the Israel of God" as the church abandons the established threefold distinction among Jews at precisely the point of its resolution and substitutes an entirely different, cross-ethnic category: believing Jews and Gentiles collectively designated as "Israel."

In conclusion, the non-literalist position that "the Israel of God" means the Jew-Gentile church fails to harmonize with the context of Galatians. Instead, it produces numerous logical, rhetorical, and literary problems that disrupt Paul's established flow of thought. The literary argument of Galatians thus establishes a context for Galatians 6:16 and provides substantial evidence against identifying "the Israel of God" with the church. For these reasons, the non-literalist view of "the Israel of God" as the church remains exegetically and contextually unsatisfying. Instead, the context of Galatians suggests "the Israel of God" refers to Jewish Christians.

III. Closing greetings (6:17–18)

Paul's final appeal that no one cause him trouble (6:17) refers to (1) the believing Jewish antagonists seeking to impose Mosaic Law upon Gentile believers, and (2) the resultant Gentile believers desiring circumcision and Lawkeeping. The explanation for why is that his

body carries the marks of Christ (6:17). Paul had received beatings and lashings from the Jews (2 Cor 11:24–25). He desired the salvation of the very people who beat him and left his body scarred. Yet if the believing Jews and Gentiles returned to the slavery of Lawkeeping, how would unbelieving Israel believe without a faithful witness of the gospel of grace? Paul desired unbelieving Israel's salvation. Thus, believing Gentiles and the Israel of God would need to live out and present the gospel of grace where men have life by the Spirit and not by the Law.

Paul's final blessing that the grace of Jesus Christ be with the Galatians' spirit (6:18) completely aligns with his purpose. All throughout, Paul had sought to convince the Galatians to believe his gospel of grace, and that the Spirit—not the Law—gives life. In these ways, even Paul's closing greetings (6:17–18) contribute to Paul's overall deliberative purpose that both Jewish and Gentile parties would agree with Paul's gospel canon that circumcision and uncircumcision are nothing, but a new creation given life through the Spirit by faith.

VI. Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to strengthen the contextual argumentation for the literalist position that "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 refers to Christian Jews, and not the Jew-Gentile church. First, this paper briefly reviewed the grammatical, lexical, historical, and contextual arguments from both literalists and non-literalists. Both sides agree the grammar of 6:16 and lexical use of the word "Israel" favor the literalist view. Both furthermore agree that the context of Galatians ought to decide the meaning of the referent. Non-literalists spend most of their effort here, and literalists, the least.

Second, this paper considered the first-century context of Christianity, the Mosaic Law, and Jew-Gentile relations. This section demonstrated how Israel's historical inclusion of Gentiles based on submission to the Law resulted in predictable Judaizing tendencies in early

Christianity. The situation in Galatia served as a microcosm of the broader debate in first-century Christianity regarding the Mosaic Law and the Christian, and Paul's unique apostolic ministry to the Gentiles provided clarity concerning the ineffectiveness of the Law for righteousness and life.

Third, this paper defined a literary book argument (or exposition) as an explanation of why and how a biblical author attempted to persuade his original audience to think or do something. It attempted to highlight the importance of a book exposition accounting for all the component parts of a literary work to show their contribution to the overall message. This explanation prepared the reader to understand the methodology employed in the subsequent section's literary argument of Galatians.

Fourth, it presented an abbreviated version of the author's literary argument of Galatians. While summarizing the argumentation of each section of Galatians, it particularly focused on elements relating to the identity of "the Israel of God." This exposition pointed to the historical occasion in Galatia as Jew-on-Jew persecution leading to Jewish Christians imposing the Mosaic Law upon Gentile Christians. It highlighted Paul's trichotomous distinction among Jews as a key element of his argumentation throughout the epistle and how that relates to the definition of "the Israel of God." That exposition of Galatians provided the necessary context for interpreting "the Israel of God."

The paper ultimately concluded that the non-literalist view of "the Israel of God" as the church presents a rhetorically, exegetically, and contextually unsatisfying solution. On the contrary, the grammatical, lexical, rhetorical, and contextual indicators in Galatians suggest "the Israel of God" in Galatians 6:16 refers to Jewish Christians. Paul and the brethren with him were one part of the Israel of God, and the Judaizing believers, another. The Judaizers, however, acted

like unbelieving Israel and so betrayed their identity. Paul desired instead that they eschew the Law as a source of righteousness and depend entirely upon the grace of Christ by faith. In doing so, the Judaizers would join Paul and the brethren with him, so living out their identity as the Israel of God with consistency.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beale, Gregory K. “Peace and Mercy Upon the Israel of God: The Old Testament Background of Galatians 6,16b.” *Biblica* 80, no. 2 (1999): 204–23.

Betz, Hans Dieter. *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Churches in Galatia*. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979.

Burer, Michael H. *Galatians*. Edited by Tremper Longman III, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Benjamin L. Gladd. Evangelical Exegetical Commentary. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Academic, 2024.

Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Dunn, James D. G. *The Epistle to the Galatians*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993.

Feldman, Louis H. *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

George, Timothy. *Galatians*. Vol. 30. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994.

Gunn, David. “Two Problem Passages on Israel and the Church for Traditional Dispensationalists.” Paper presented at the 2015 annual conference of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics.

Hirsch, E. D. *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967.

Johnson, S. Lewis, Jr. “Paul and the “Israel of God”: An Exegetical and Eschatological Case Study.” In *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, edited by Stanley D. Toussaint, and Charles H. Dyer, 181–96. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986.

Köstenberger, Andreas J. “The Identity of the Ἰσραηλ Του Θεου (Israel of God) in Galatians 6:16.” *Faith and Mission* 19, no. 1 (2001): 3–18.

Longenecker, Richard N. *Galatians*. Vol. 41. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1990.

Martyn, J. Louis. *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. The Anchor Yale Bible. Vol. 33A. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

Moo, Douglas J. *Galatians*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013.

Pratt, Jonathan. “The ‘Israel of God’ in Galatians 6:16.” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 23 (2018): 59–75.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism*. Rev. ed. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995.

Sailhamer, John H. “Johann August Ernesti: The Role of History in Biblical Interpretation.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (June 2001): 193–206.

Schreiner, Thomas R. *Galatians*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010.

Vlach, Michael J. *Has the Church Replaced Israel?: A Theological Evaluation*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010.