

The “new creation” of which Paul speaks is not a “new religion.”¹³ It is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise in the life of the redeemed individual. This same thought is given by Paul in 2Cor. 5:17:

Therefore if anyone is in Messiah, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

He makes the same claim in 1Cor 9:17:

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God.

Here, “keeping the commandments of God” is another way of saying “a new creation.” Those who are circumcised in heart evidence their changed status (“new creation”) by keeping the commandments of God.

This new creation is a foretaste of the ultimate new creation, the world to come. For in the death of Messiah, the death grip of sin upon the created universe (including mankind) has been broken. All that is needed to crush the head of the serpent has been accomplished. The “old world,” with its bent toward rebellion and idolatry, must now give way to the victory of God in Messiah. As redeemed individuals, we partake now in a share of the world to come in which God’s reign will be complete, and the “old world” will be destroyed. Even as we participated in the rebellion of the first Adam, so now we participate in the victory of the last Adam (Rom 5:14ff). Thus, for Paul the term “new creation” sums up the whole scope of God’s redemption of the individual sinner, “having put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:10).

Since the process is not yet complete, “the new creation,” in practical terms, means a life oriented both to the past (Christ’s death and resurrection as paradigmatic, for relationship to the world as well ...), and to the future triumph of God in Christ (what will be in God’s intention as creator, as providing the norms and goals for life in this world.)¹⁴

16 And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.

Once again, Paul connects this with the former train of thought by the connective “and” (*καί, kai*). He has finished his discourse, he can say no more by way of argument or polemic. His position has been clearly expressed, and so he adds a final blessing.

Here the dividing mark pertains to those who will follow his teaching, his *halachah* (“walk”) in accordance with the “rule” (*κανών, kanōn*, from which we derive our English word “canon”) that he has given. This rule is the distinction between covenant membership as taught by the Influencers (ethnic status being the basis) and as taught by Paul (faith in the crucified and risen Messiah). He cannot petition God for “peace” and “mercy” for those who have willingly and knowingly rejected His Son. Thus, the dividing mark is set: God’s way or man’s.

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¹³ Contrary to Betz, *Galatians*, p. 320: “Paul does not spell it out, but in fact he announces the establishment of a new religion.”

¹⁴ Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 345.

Paul uses the verb *στοιχέω* (*stoicheō*), “those who will walk by this rule,” as he does in 5:25. The basic meaning of the verb is “be in line with a set standard or rule,” the noun *στοῖχος* (*stoichos*) describing things that are “in a row,” or “in line,” such as a row or course of masonry. (Note the use of *στοιχεῖον* (*stoicheion*) “elements” or “building blocks” of the universe in 4:3, 9). Here, Paul’s Gospel, which emphasized the equal status of Jew and Gentile in the body of Messiah, is set forth as the rule for faith and practice.

“Peace and mercy” (שְׁלוֹם וְחֶסֶד, *shalom v’chesed*) are markedly Jewish, being often used in the liturgical *berachot* as well as in Jewish literature. Thus, the last of the Shemonei Esrei (in the Babylonian recension) reads: שְׁמֵי שְׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חֵן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמָּךְ, “Grant peace, goodness and blessing, grace, lovingkindness and compassion upon us and upon all Israel Your people.” The 18th Benediction from the Cairo Genizah (Palestinian recension) reads: שְׁמֵי שְׁלוֹמְךָ עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמָּךְ וְעַל עִירְךָ וְעַל נַחֲלֹתֶיךָ וּבְרַכְנוּנוּ כּוֹלֵנוּ, “Grant Your peace upon Israel Your people and upon Your city and upon Your heritage, and bless all of us as one. Blessed are You Adonai, Who makes peace.” That Paul includes both *εἰρήνη* (*eirene*, “peace”) and *ἔλεος* (*eleos*, “mercy”) may indicate that he was familiar with the pre-Mishnaic form of the blessing. For in the LXX, *ἔλεος*, “mercy,” is regularly the word chosen to translate *חֶסֶד*, *chesed*, “lovingkindness,” which generally focuses upon faithful loyalty to covenant promises.

Indeed, the combination of “peace and mercy” as a blessing upon Israel may well stem from texts such as Ps 125:5 and 128:6, “Peace be upon Israel,” and is found in Psalms of Solomon (4:25; 6:6; 8:27-28; 9:8; 11:9, “The mercy of the Lord be upon Israel forever and ever” and 13:12; 16:6; 17:45, “May God hasten His mercy upon Israel”).¹⁵ Given the fact that the combination of peace and mercy as a blessing upon Israel was common in the Jewish literature and liturgy, and that Paul here evokes this blessing “upon all who follow this rule,” his meaning is clear: both Jew and Gentile, who have come to faith in Messiah, are to be viewed as within the boundaries of the designation “Israel.” This is even more so in light of the fact that Paul uses the combination of “peace” with “mercy” in only two other places: 1Tim 1:2; 2Tim 1:2, where he is making a personal communication to his beloved disciple, Timothy.

and upon the Israel of God – We may first ask for what purpose Paul adds this much debated phrase. Several possibilities present themselves:

- 1) that having confidently asserted, through the use of a common Jewish blessing, that those who “walk by this rule” are who constitute Israel, i.e., those worthy of receiving the common blessing, Paul may have recoiled a bit. He may have feared that in making such a bold assertion regarding the covenant membership of the Gentiles within Israel, that he might be misunderstood as saying that unbelieving Israel had somehow lost her identity as the chosen people of God. Thus, in order to assuage such thinking, he adds “and upon the Israel of God,” i.e., the Israel of God’s choosing, regardless of their present state of unbelief.
- 2) that by “Israel of God,” Paul is reinforcing the fact (emphasized in the offering of the blessing upon “those who walk by this rule”) that only those who understand and accept the

15 Quoted from Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 344.

message of the Gospel (i.e., that covenant membership is ultimately gained through faith and not through ethnic status) are, indeed, the “Israel of God.” By this he would be both affirming the inclusion of the believing Gentiles, and exhorting the Influencers to recognize the central place the Gospel plays in the whole matter of covenant membership.

The term “Israel of God” is not found elsewhere in the Apostolic Writings, nor in Jewish literature. The Qumran sect used *אֱסֶפֶת אֱלֹהִים*, “assembly of God,” *עֲצֻת אֱלֹהִים*, “congregation of God,” *אֲדָת אֱלֹהִים*, “community of God,”¹⁶ but never “Israel of God.” Paul likewise speaks of the *ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ*, “the assembly of God”¹⁷ by which he must mean “the assembly that God recognizes as His.”

At first the expression seems redundant: Israel is obviously related to, or finds its identity in, God. But the Qumran usage would indicate that “of God” is used to establish authenticity, thus “assembly of God” means the “true assembly” as opposed to those who are false in their worship. In this regard, Paul’s use of “Israel of God” here has been often interpreted to mean the “true Israel” in distinction from those who, through whatever means, have denied God. It is true that Paul refers to the “false circumcision” (Phil 3:2), but here he is most likely referring to those of The Way who submitted to becoming proselytes. And he can also speak of Jews, who find their identity in Torah observance, yet render their “circumcision” as “uncircumcision” because of their disobedience (Rom 2:25ff).

Ultimately, the question revolves around the referent of “Israel of God.” Does it describe “those who walk by this rule,” or does it refer to those who do not accept Paul’s teaching on this matter, but who are nonetheless ethnically Jewish, and who therefore are part of the chosen people of Israel?

The sentence itself may be understood in two ways (in terms of its syntactical structure). Either the final phrase is taken as a further description of “those who walk by this rule,” or it is understood as adding a second group who also participate in the blessing alongside “those who walk by this rule.” The sentence structure itself is less clear than the English translations might indicate. Here is a literal, word-for-word rendering, leaving each word in its original order (and rendering *καί*, *kai*, the conjunctive by “and” each time):

καὶ ὅσοι τῷ κανόνι τούτῳ στοιχήσουσιν, εἰρήνη ἐπ’ αὐτοὺς καὶ ἔλεος καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραὴλ τοῦ θεοῦ.

“And those to this rule will walk, peace upon them and mercy and upon the Israel of God.”

It can be seen that “peace and mercy” are not directly joined as a pair with the word “and,” but are separated by “upon them.” As a result, some commentators have suggested a re-punctuation of the verse, to read: “And to those who walk by this rule, peace upon them, and may mercy also be upon the Israel of God.”¹⁸ In this translation, the final *καί* (“and”) has been understood as pleonastic, yielding “also” or “namely,” which is a common use of *καί*.

However, the combination of “peace and mercy” seems surely tied to a

16 See Betz, *Galatians*, p. 323, n. 112.

17 Acts 20:28; 1Cor 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; 2Cor 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1Tim. 3:5.

18 See Betz, *Galatians*, p. 322-23, where he outlines this view held by Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 79. Betz ends up not adopting this view.

common blessing formula represented in the Shemonei Esrei, and in other Jewish literature as well. To break it up, as though peace belongs to “those who walk by this rule,” and mercy belongs to the “Israel of God,” seems to miss the fact that peace and mercy functioned as parts of a set blessing formula.

In the end, we seem to be left with only two viable options: 1) either Paul uses “Israel of God” as a further designation for those “who walk by this rule,” or 2) he uses Israel of God to expand the blessing of peace and mercy to include those who were not willing to follow Paul’s gospel rule, but who were, nonetheless, the chosen people of God, Israel. Yet to limit ourselves to these two options is to accept the mistaken notion that Paul recognized “those who walk by this rule” as separate from the larger expression of Israel. For Paul, the ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) existed within Israel, not outside of Israel. The *ekklesia* is the remnant of Israel. Paul’s hope and prayer was that through the existence of The Way within Israel, and especially the ingathering of the Gentiles into Israel through the proclamation of the Gospel, all of Israel would be saved. In this way, the “Israel of God” has eschatological ramifications, for the “Israel of God” envisions the final gathering of Israel to faith. The picture Paul has is one of leaven, which, when put into a lump of dough, eventually leavens the whole lump. In the same way, the followers of Yeshua, both Jew and Gentile alike, joined by faith in Yeshua to constitute the believing remnant, would eventually be used by God as the means of Israel’s national salvation. The Israel of God is therefore not a group “other than” those who walk by this rule, but the larger covenant community in which the believing remnant exists. And this view of Israel, that it includes those Gentile who have joined her throughout the centuries, is in accordance with the promise of the Abrahamic covenant which is the central focus of Paul in this epistle. The Gentile believers are not a new entity now blessed by God, but have expanded Israel as the covenant promised. “In you (Abram) all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

Therefore, Paul’s purpose in adding the phrase is eschatological in recognizing that the present ingathering of the Gentiles would have a good effect, ultimately, upon all of Israel (Rom 11:25). In his emphasis upon the equality of the Gentiles within the covenant (which has been the main theme of his polemic and exhortation throughout the epistle), he did not lose sight of the fact that God’s ultimate and final purpose in the whole scheme of redemption and salvation was that “all Israel will be saved.” To have ended the epistle with a blessing only upon those who had presently confessed Yeshua as Messiah, and who had clung to the message of his Gospel of faith, would have been to give the wrong message. Ultimately, peace and mercy would likewise come upon Israel as a nation, for in the eschaton, “all Israel will be saved.”

We may therefore paraphrase the verse in this manner: “And may peace and mercy be upon all who walk according to this rule of faith, that is, upon us, who are the remnant within Israel. And may peace and mercy ultimately and finally come upon all of Israel, the chosen of God, as He proves Himself faithful to His covenant word.”

In this regard, the final blessing of the kaddish bears the same kind of formula: עוֹשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרוֹמָיו הוּא יַעֲשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל, “The One who makes peace in His heights (Job 25:2), may He make peace upon us, and upon all Israel.” Here, the adding of “upon all Israel” seems redundant:

surely those making the petition (“upon us”) include themselves in Israel. So the added “and upon all Israel” is not exclusive of petitioners, but inclusive, and expansive. The same, I would suggest, is true of Paul’s use of “Israel of God.” But the added “of God” emphasizes the divine sovereignty in the eschatological salvation of Israel.

17 From now on let no one cause trouble for me, for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Yeshua.

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Dunn suggests that, even though in the “Israel of God,” Paul has extended an olive branch to the Influencers, he here “retreats back into an impatient grumpiness.”¹⁹ Whether or not we should impugn Paul with being “grumpy,” it is clear that he has been greatly vexed by the trouble the Influencers have caused. The word translated “trouble” is κόπος (*kopos*), which denotes “beating” or “weariness as though one has been beaten.” Paul felt as though he had undergone yet another one of his beatings, though this time not in a physical sense, but in spirit. He therefore half begs, and half commands, that the “beating” stop, and that the those who persist in foisting this theological error by which his disciples are being led astray (or might yet be lead astray) stop at once, and not begin again (“from now on ...”).

for I bear on my body the brand-marks of Yeshua – Paul is emphatic in the use of the redundant pronoun: ἐγὼ γὰρ τὰ στίγματα τοῦ Ἰησοῦ ἐν τῷ σώματί μου βαστάζω (where the pronoun “I” is put first in the sentence, with the 1st person verb thrown to the very end). He wants the Galatians to know that he personally bears the *stigmata* of Yeshua in his body. This no doubt is tied to his use of *kopos*, for in being reminded that his present trouble was ever as painful as the many beatings he had endured for the cause of Yeshua, he was also very aware that the scars these beatings had left were very much still present.

Some have suggested that there were actual “branding marks” which Paul bore as the result of his imprisonments, but this is not likely. Likewise, those later fancies of the Papist Church, given by those who taught that Paul (and others) spontaneously bleed in the very spots where Yeshua was wounded on the cross, are not worthy of our consideration.

Why would the mention of his scars have been sufficient reason for the Influencers to “lay off?” It is not that Paul was using the logic that he had been given enough pain, and that there was therefore no reason for them to add to it. Rather, the scars he bore as a result of being wiped and stoned (cf. Acts 16:22, 37; 2Cor 11:23, 25) were proof that he was not engaged in some kind of self-aggrandizing effort. He was not sporting Rolex watches or living in extravagant palaces as the rewards for some kind of “name it and claim it” gospel. The scars he bore were proof that he was willing to follow the lowly yet majestic Messiah, and to share in His sufferings (Col 1:24). The message he gave was therefore the message he must give—it held for him no great earthly comforts, as though the message was repackaged to afford him escape from tribulation. On the contrary, anyone who continued to give such a message in the face of continual reprisals must be seen as fully convinced that his message was both true and necessary.

Thus, Paul’s appeal is based upon the clear and evident veracity of his own mission and message. No one could accuse him of “doing his own thing.” The word he had given to the Galatians was the truth as he received it from Yeshua

¹⁹ Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 346.

Himself.

18 The grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah be with your spirit, brethren. Amen.

The benediction is typical of Paul's epistles. The brevity of the salutation should not be construed as indicating any terseness on his part, for even in his most friendly communications (Philippians, Philemon) he uses short salutations.

Grace, one of Paul's favorite words, ends the epistle even as he began it (1:3). It was not merely a kind of "farewell" term that had given way to formality, but it was packed with all of the glory of the divine initiative in salvation, for it is the "grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah," displayed in His willing death and life on behalf of His people. Moreover, Paul's use of the full Name once again emphasized the Kingship of the One he served, together with His sovereign ability to save sinners.

Only here does Paul use "with your spirit" as part of a salutation. Perhaps this was to emphasize that the unity he felt with the Galatians, was, as this point, one of unity in spirit, since he was unable to be there physically. Paul was confident that the Spirit of God working in their spirit (cf. Rom 8:16) would indeed bring his impassioned message to its intended goal, that is, the rescuing of these Galatians from the grave error to which they had been subjected.

The most unusual part of the salutation, however, is the addition of "brethren," found only here in the closing remarks of his epistles. Surely his words have been harsh at times, and even ironic and rhetorical. Yet in the end he wishes them to know that he counts them as true brothers "in the household of faith," (6:10). As Bengel noted, "the severity of the whole epistle is thus softened."²⁰

The final "amen" ("may it be so") was not only Paul's prayer for the Galatians, but not doubt his confidence as well. The word of truth does not return void.

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²⁰ Dunn, *Galatians*, p. 348.