The concept of “Israel” is not monolithic. In the Torah and prophets the term Israel is already used in a number of ways. Israel is the name Jacob received after he fought the divine, and in consequence it is used for the 12 sons of Jacob and their descendants. In the course of the history of the monarchy it is also used merely for the northern state or for the united entity of Israel and Judah. Beyond the political it has an ideological claim: it is the name of the Jews as the people of God.¹ By Second Temple times this ideological use has replaced the political meaning: the term occurs frequently and it was rarely used to describe the contemporary political entity; as such it had been replaced by “Judeans” or related terms. At that time, references to “Israel” as the political Jewish people constitute an archaic use of language implying a turning away from contemporary constellations and a return to the nation’s covenant relationship with God.² But, as Collins points out, in many Second Temple texts, and especially in Qumran, the ideological use has brought about a “tension between Israel as it existed and Israel as it ought to be.”³ When applied to contemporary Jews in Second Temple times, the term describes the national election, but also more specifically it refers to the people of God in contrast to the question of ethnicity.⁴ In the Bible already, ethnic Israel, although the people of God, has not always been obedient to God. As term for the

people of God, “Israel” is a challenge for Paul and his mission to the Gentiles. The relationship to Israel was important for the self-definition of the new entity that was to become Christianity.

Fundamentally Paul uses “Israel” as an ethnic term for the descendants of the twelve tribes: in Phil 3:5f Paul defines himself as a genuine Jew using the words: “having been circumcised on the eighth day, from the people of Israel, the tribe Benjamin, Hebrew out of Hebrews, according to the Law a Pharisee, according to zeal a persecutor of the congregation, according to the righteousness in the Torah flawless.” (περιτομῇ ὀκταήμερος ἐκ γένους Ἰσραήλ, φυλῆς Βενιαμίν, Ἐβραίος ἐκ Ἐβραίων, κατὰ νόμον Φαρισαίος, κατὰ ζήλους διώκων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἀμεμπτος). Here ethnic Israel and observance of the Jewish traditions are identified. The perfection of his state in the Jewish life is expressed by descent, life and the willingness to defend the proper observance of the Torah. Yet Paul does not always simply identify Israel with the Jews, and this causes additional problems for him.

In 1 Cor 10:18 Paul uses the “Israel according to the flesh” (Ἰσραήλ κατὰ σάρκα) and the communion shared at the altar in the Temple by those participating in and sharing the meat of the sacrifices as positive example for the Christians. In an argument a minore ad maius he points out that if even “Israel according to the flesh” can have such a communion, how much more does Christian communion create a bond which should not be defiled. “Israel” here is not derogatory. Likewise in Gal 6:16 Paul concludes the letter with a blessing on all those who abandon the distinction between circumcision and being uncircumcised and “on the Israel of God” (ἐπὶ τὸν Ἰσραήλ τοῦ θεοῦ), here clearly referring to the Christian community of Jews and gentiles, “those who believe.” In these contexts he extends the relationship between “Israel” as the people of God and the Christian community, while still showing awareness of the special status of ethnic Israel in God’s plan. That Paul does not simply remove the

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7 Harvey, Israel, 226