

# The Israel Of God

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In Galatians 6:16, the apostle Paul refers to the church as "the Israel of God." Why? Why not "the Judah of God," or "the Ephraim of God" or "the Galilee of God?" Why did God not inspire Paul to call the church by Israel's original name, Jacob—"the Jacob of God?"

We can learn much from the names God gives people, places or things because those names reflect the way He perceives them. What can we learn about God's church by studying the name Paul used for it in Galatians 6?

It was God Himself who first uttered the word *Israel*. He changed Jacob's name to Israel after a long, agonizing night of wrestling at Peniel (Penuel). The incident is recorded in Genesis 32:25-28:

Now when He [the preincarnate Christ, the God of the Old Testament] saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, "Let Me go, for the day breaks." But he said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" So He said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." And He said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed."

When Jacob returns to Bethel after his twenty years of service to Laban, God reiterates Jacob's new name in Genesis 35:9-10:

Then God appeared to Jacob again, when he came from Padan Aram, and blessed him. And God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; your name shall not be called Jacob anymore, but Israel shall be your name." So He called his name Israel.

## Jacob's New Name

Commentators and scholars cite a number of possible meanings for the word *Israel*, which is made up of two Hebrew roots. Two translations stand out:

1. **He prevails with God.** This translation emphasizes the idea of **prevailing against strength through dogged struggle**. *The Jerusalem Bible* translates *Israel* with this force: "He has been strong against God."
2. **He rules as God.** *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* translates *Israel* (# 3478) with a future force: he will rule as God. This rendering emphasizes the idea of **rulership, as a prince ruling over his adversaries because of persistent struggle**.

Is *Israel* an apt name for God's Church? Do her members prevail with God? Do they—or will they—rule as princes with God?

God did not hide His reason for choosing *Israel* as a new name for Jacob. He picked it because Jacob had "struggled with God and with men, and...prevailed" (Genesis 32:28). *Prevailing* is an essential

idea behind his new name. Let's look at the life of Jacob to see why God came to see him as a prevailer.

A natural place to begin is Jacob's birth. Genesis 25:24-26:

So when her [Rebekah's] days were fulfilled for her to give birth, indeed there were twins in her womb. And the first came out red. He was like a hairy garment all over, so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came out, and his hand took hold of Esau's heel; so his name was called Jacob.

The word *Jacob* means "supplanter." Jacob was aggressive from the very start. He cunningly used circumstances to his advantage—usually at the expense of others. Early on, he exploited his brother's hunger to gain from him the birthright (Genesis 25:29-34). In this incident, he supplanted his brother's property rights. Of course, Esau was not blameless in this matter; he lacked proper respect for the privilege of the birthright—despised it—and therefore lost it (Hebrews 12:16-17).

In a later incident, Jacob and his mother conspired to deceive Isaac into bestowing the firstborn's blessing on Jacob. Remember, Esau was the firstborn. Genesis 27 tells the story. The intrigue to deceive Isaac involved everything from subtle deception (Jacob wore his brother's clothes—verse 15), to a double dose of blatant lying (Jacob outrightly identified himself as Esau—verses 19 and 24). Jacob even brought God's name into the conspiracy, a clear violation of what later became called the Third Commandment, by giving Him credit for the quick capture and preparation of the food (verse 20). In reality, Jacob had merely fetched a domesticated animal from the flock for his mother to prepare (verse 9).

However, Isaac blessed Jacob. The deception "worked," but bore bitter fruit: Jacob had to flee for his life. When Rebekah learned that Esau planned to kill him after Isaac's death, she packed her younger son off to her brother Laban, in Padan Aram, to "stay with him a few days, until your brother's fury turns away" (verse 44). A few days indeed! Jacob sojourned with Laban for two decades (Genesis 31:38) and even then "was greatly afraid and distressed" (Genesis 32:7) when he finally returned to the land of his birth.

While God's Word gives only a sketch of Jacob's twenty-year sojourn with Laban, clearly the patriarch developed an ever-stronger relationship with God as the years passed. It was an extremely slow process. But, by the time the second decade drew to a close, God was willing to assure Jacob of His protection. Here are Jacob's "marching orders": "Then the Lord said to Jacob, 'Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you'" (Genesis 31:3).

Jacob did not hesitate, but immediately fled Padan Aram. With God's help, he *prevailed* over the churlish Laban as they confronted each other in the mountains near Gilead (Genesis 31:22-55). Later, at Peniel, he *prevailed* with God by refusing to break off the wrestling match. Just afterward, he *prevailed* with Esau, as the two brothers became at least nominally reconciled (Genesis 33:1-17). Sometime later, Jacob took his stand *against* idolatry and *for* the worship of the true God (Genesis 35:2-3).

Jacob did mature, though ever so slowly. As this passage indicates, he finally came to the point where he recognized God's working in his life during all those years. Humbled, he was now willing

to offer thanks to His God. And God, true to His word, protected him during his journey home. Genesis 35:5: "The terror of God was upon the cities that were all around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Jacob."

The prophet Hosea gives us a cameo which insightfully contrasts the combative, self-reliant, competitive supplanter, Jacob, with the overcomer he became, Israel:

He took his brother by the heel in the womb, and in his strength he struggled with God.  
Yes, he struggled with the Angel and prevailed; he wept, and sought favor from Him.  
(Hosea 12:3-4)

Hosea completes the picture Moses sketches in Genesis: Jacob wept, humbly begging God's favor. Jacob's experience in Bethel, where God changed his name, as well as his earlier experience in Peniel, where God wrestled with him, were milestones on his road to conversion. God understood that Jacob was bent on prevailing, that he was an overcomer. His new name, meaning "He prevails with God," was apt indeed!

### **The Church Prevails with God**

Speaking in type, in symbol, we can say that the man named *Jacob* represents a person who has not overcome—a carnal person. The man named *Israel*, on the other hand, represents a prevailing Christian, an overcomer. It is this Christian who will eventually inherit the Kingdom of God.

Christ was perhaps recalling His wrestling match with Jacob, centuries earlier, when He commented that "the violent take [the Kingdom] by force" (Matthew 11:12). J. B. Phillips has it: "The Kingdom of heaven has been taken by storm and eager men and forcing their way into it." It takes sweat.

Paul also probably pictured Jacob's wrestling ardently with Christ when he, using slightly different metaphors, said, "I run the race then with determination. I am no shadow-boxer, I really fight! I am my body's sternest master" (I Corinthians 9:26-27, Phillips).

Overcoming is the common thread connecting every one of the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3. Every member of God's church has the need to overcome a sinful nature. John describes that nature as "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (I John 2:16). These are the ways of a world which is passing away (verse 17). We must come out of the world (Revelation 18:4).

In Titus 3:3, Paul describes the way we were, all of us, including the supplanter Jacob, before we came out of the world: "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another."

Paul further defines these "works of the flesh" in Galatians 5:19-21:

. . . adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Without overcoming, we will not see God's Kingdom! It may be imprecise to equate overcoming with sanctification, but overcoming certainly is a big part of the sanctification process. Really, there is no sanctification without it. The overcomers will be those who are ultimately sanctified, who wear "fine linen, clean and bright" at the Marriage of the Lamb (Revelation 19:7-8).

Characteristically, God's true church is a spiritual organism whose members, with God's help, will ultimately prevail over their own sinful natures, over the world and over Satan. The Israel of God, like Jacob, prevails with God. Christ certainly remembered His wrestling match with the unrelenting Jacob when He inspired Paul to call His church "the Israel of God."

### **The Church Will Rule As God**

*Israel*, as we saw, can mean, "He rules as God" or "He will rule as God." God's true church, the Israel of God, will rule as God. Let's start chasing this down by revisiting Genesis 35:10 where God reiterates Jacob's new name. Notice particularly the blessing that follows in verses 11-12:

Also God said to him: "I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall proceed from you, and kings shall come from your body. The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac I give to you; and to your descendants after you I give this land."

In the past we have correctly construed this to be a promise of national greatness for Jacob's posterity. The "company of nations" we know beyond a doubt to be the British Empire, currently, a commonwealth of nations. The single "nation" certainly refers to Manasseh, the United States. The "kings" coming from Jacob refer to the literally hundreds of monarchs who descended from him through his son Judah. These monarchs have populated virtually every royal house of Europe. Chief among them all, and enthroned to this day, is the British monarch, who is a direct descendant of king David.

But, there is an equally valid "spiritual" interpretation of this blessing. *The "kings" descending from Jacob are those individuals who, like him, have overcome and will someday inherit God's Kingdom, the "land" they seek.* They are a *spiritual* posterity, not a physical one.

If we can determine who the patriarchs' spiritual offspring are, we will be well on our way to understanding who the "kings" descending from Jacob are. Paul clearly establishes that Abraham's *spiritual* children are not necessarily his *physical* ones. He does this during a long discussion of God's reconciliation of Israel and the Gentiles in Romans 9 through 11, specifically in Romans 9:6-8:

For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

In Galatians 3:29, Paul forthrightly tells us who these "children of the promise" are. *They are true Christians*: "If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Christians, then, are the *spiritual* children of Abraham. Spiritually understood, the descendants of Abraham, through Isaac (Romans 9:7), through Jacob (Genesis 35:11) will inherit the promises. They will inherit the "land" God promised Jacob in Genesis 35:12 (cf. Matthew 5:5).

Paul, having broached the subject of heirs at the end of Galatians 3, expounds on the right of inheritance in Galatians 4:1-7. He draws a distinction between slaves (and we were all once slaves to sin—Romans 6:6, 17-18), who have no right of inheritance, and children, who enjoy that right. Paul concludes, "Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Galatians 4:7).

Does all this mean that God's Church, the Israel of God, rules *now*? Of course not! Paul reminds us that even sons are under the tutelage of servants "until the time appointed by the father" (Galatians 4:2). John tells us that, "He who overcomes *shall* inherit all things" (Revelation 21:7, emphasis ours). *We are heirs now; later we shall be inheritors!*

Right now, it is Christ who rules all things. Just before He returned to His Father, He reassured His disciples that, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18). But eventually, the "heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29), true Christians, will inherit all things. These are the children of God, spiritually speaking, through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul makes it clear in Romans 8:16-17:

The Spirit [it]self bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

True Christians will inherit Christ's kingly authority, sitting with Him on His throne. John, in Revelation 5:10, writes of a glorious future for us. Christ will have "made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."

As members of the God Family—children of God, we will be God, ruling as He would rule. *Spiritually speaking, we will be the kings God promised would descend from Jacob* (Genesis 35:12). Yes, *Israel* is an apt designation for God's church; the Israel of God will rule as God.

Viewed in the present tense or in the future, we in the true Israel of God have a great deal in common with our patriarch Jacob. Like him, we will eventually have a new name (Revelation 3:12). Like him, we struggle to overcome. And like him, those who remain faithful among us will someday prevail, qualifying to rule as God—princes forever with Him.