

The Patriarch Jacob Gets a New Name: Israel

Then He said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:28)

Modern **Israel** is a nation-state located in the Middle East, near the Mediterranean Sea and surrounded by the nations of Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. However, before it referred to a nation, the name Israel first referred to a man. After a night of wrestling with an unnamed “man,” Jacob insisted he would not let go of the man until the man blessed him. So, he gave Jacob a new name, saying “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel.” Stop and read Genesis 32:22-32. After receiving the blessing of a new name, Jacob concluded that he had seen God face to face, and yet his life had been delivered (32:30). [*Who is this God a person could see face-to-face and not die?*] Name changes are important. Yahweh changed Abram’s name to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah (Gen 17). Later, in the same chapter, Yahweh directed them to name their son Isaac. Notice Yahweh named all three of His Patriarchs in Genesis: Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. The word “Israel” appears 2579 times in the ESV, referring to persons, people, land, and an unholy and holy nation.

Jacob—now **Israel**—will be the father of the twelve tribes of Israel (49:28). Notice how the second use of the word “Israel” now refers to the nation Yahweh first promised to make from Abram (12:2). In Genesis 36:21, the sons and daughters of Israel are called Israelites. Two chapters earlier, the sons of Jacob refer to the land they are living in as Israel (34:7). The student of the Bible quickly realizes Israel is used in many different ways in the OT and the NT.

Israel is a compound of two Hebrew words. The first word of the compound is translated as “striven” in the ESV and “struggled”, “wrestled”, or “contended” in other translations. The second word is “El” a shortened version of *Elohim* (God). Jacob’s name change to Israel memorializes the night he wrestled with God and prevailed. So, each time you see the word “Israel,” notice the “el” and remind yourself that Elohim put His name in the name of His people (Rev 22:4).

Hosea 11:1 reads, “When **Israel** was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Jacob died in Egypt. It was the *nation* Israel that Yahweh loved and called out of Egypt in the great Exodus described in the first half of the book of Exodus. But the Apostle Matthew quotes this very verse and applies it to Jesus, God’s Son. He writes, “This was to fulfill what the Lord [Yahweh] had spoken by the prophet [Hosea] ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’ [Jesus]” (Mat 2:15). Jesus was a toddler when Joseph and Mary took Him to Egypt, and when it was safe to return, an angel told Joseph to take Jesus back to the land of Israel. Thus, Israel (Yahweh’s Son) returned to Israel (the land).

Surely, at this point, one would think we have covered all the possible ways **Israel** is used in the Bible, but one more important use must be unpacked. In Romans 9:6, Paul writes, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel.” In the same verse, the word Israel is used in two *different* ways. Not all of Jacob’s (Israel’s) biological descendants belong to the second use of the word Israel. In the second use of Israel, Paul creates a new category of Israelites. These Israelites are not biological; they are *spiritual* descendants of Abraham by faith (Gal 3:7, Gen 12:3). They believe in the promises of God, as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob believed. Jesus is the Israel of God, and all who are spiritually in Christ (Israel) (Rom 8:1) are citizens of the *true Israel* of God (Gal 6:16).

Read the chart left to right to see all the ways **Israel** refers to persons, people, land, a nation, and God’s elect.

Israel	
One specific man, Jacob (Gen 32:28)	A geographic location often called the Promised Land (formerly Canaan) (Matt 2:20)
Biological descendants of Jacob and Yahweh’s Chosen People (struggling to become a nation) (Exo 1:7)	The United Kingdom of all 12 tribes of Israel led by Kings Saul, David, and Solomon (1Sa 13:1)
The Divided Kingdom of the 10 northern tribes formed after the split (1Ki 12:20)	Ethnic, national, and territorial Israel re-formed after the 70 years of captivity (Ezr 1:3)
The God-Man, Jesus the Christ (Hos 11:1, Mat 2:15)	Spiritual descendants of Abraham who by faith are in Christ Jesus—the Israel of God (Gal 6:16)