

Why Is Israel Called Israel?

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Theophoric names, consisting of the name of a deity and a verb, were common in the ancient Near East. (Examples still in use today include Jeremiah, "God exalts," Daniel and Jehoshaphat – both meaning "God judges", any number of names based on the Greek and Roman gods, and so on).

The verb should describe an attribute of the deity, not of the person.

The problem is that it isn't clear what that rare verb *isra* means, and various scholars and translators do not agree.

The King James translation of the Bible for example, took the verb to derive from the root s-r-r and thus interpreted it "as a prince hast thou power," or in other words, "rules like a prince".

Other scholars have suggested that the verb comes from the root y-sh-r, - meaning "straight" or "fair," thus the name would mean something like "God is just."

But the best answer is apparently that which the Bible itself gives in the Genesis verse above, that "isra" means "struggles," or "fights." But it isn't Jacob who is doing the struggling, it's God. By that interpretation, "Israel" means "God shall fight".

But why would the ancient Israelites call themselves "God shall fight"?

Perhaps because they wanted to be known as a people whose God – remember, then, he was thought to be one of many deities - would indeed fight for them.

Supporting that argument, the Bible indicates that the ancient Israelites believed that God was fighting their battles with them, especially when they took the Ark of the Covenant with them into battle.

Interpretations of the Name Israel in Ancient Judaism and Some Early Christian Writings

By C. T. R. Hayward

<http://buff.ly/2r54DgZ>

The translators of the Septuagint (LXX) understood Jacob's wrestling with the angel as pre-figuring Moses' experience at the burning bush.

Clement of Alexandria draws on Philo to show that the wrestler with Jacob was the Logos, not at that time given a name but later revealed as Jesus. Philo understands the term "Israel" to mean "the one who sees God." But he does not offer an etymology.

Josephus, in contrast, declared that Israel means "One that struggled with the divine angel."

According to the Book of Jubilees, Jacob's change of name occurred on the seventh day of the feast of Tabernacles. Following his experience, Jacob celebrated an extra day - the eighth day of the feast, thus solidifying the sacred character of that extra day.

Some ancient Jewish sources see "Israel" derived from the Hebrew word "to sing," conveying the idea that Israel, like the highest angels, sings God's praises and shares in the heavenly service.

The Angel of the Presence, Michael (other sources say it was the Archangel Uriel or Sariel), must leave at dawn because that is the time of singing praises to God. In other Targumim, that angel is the "chief of those who utter praise."

The Targum Pseudo-Jonathan says "Send me away, because the column of the dawn has come up; and the hour for the angels of the height praising the Lord of the universe has arrived. And from the day that the world was created my time to praise has not arrived, but (only) this one time. And he said: I am not going to send you away unless you bless me. (Targum PJ of Genesis 32:27)

This Targum also says after Jacobs asks the angel his name, *Jacob* blesses the Angel, not vice-versa. (This is to show Israel's rule like a prince over the angels)

It also says the place was called Peniel because he had seen "the angels of the Lord" face-to-face there, (rather than God's face) "and my soul has been saved."

Genesis Rabbah maintains that the Angel could not tell Jacob his name because angels, with the exception of Michael and Gabriel, have no permanent names. Rather they are returned each day to the River of Fire, and emerge with new personae to praise the Almighty. This makes the name of Israel even more significant, for it is permanent.

Gospel of John

John 1:18 - "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him."

John 5:37 - "And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape."

"shape" here is *eidos* (form) and occurs only here in John's gospel. The Septuagint uses it twice to speak directly of God - at Genesis 32:31,32 regarding Peniel as "form (face)

of God.”

John speaks 15 times in this chapter linking “Israel” with “seeing.”