

THE MEANING OF THE WORD
יִשְׂרָאֵל (ISRAEL)
AND ITS DEVELOPMENT BY THE
APOSTLE PAUL

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How an individual defines the Hebrew word for "Israel" can actually serve as an indicator for many of his or her's theological positions. This proposition loses some of its validity when we observe that usage which a naïve person may employ, such a person may simply be mimicking the usage of the term by his/her peers, and hence have no actual theological import as concerns their own theology. When a mature saint and student of the Scriptures is observed (as to their definition of the term "Israel"), we may then begin to assay their theological presumptions. This brief paper is aimed at both types of individuals—those who actually know what they mean when they use the term "Israel", and those who have not yet examined the term on their own so as to be able to confidently define the word.

Much has been written upon this Hebrew word, which fully pointed is – **יִשְׂרָאֵל** and is transliterated in Greek as Ἰσραηλ. Arguments often stem from a historical examination of the word in an etymological sense, especially since Northwest Semitic studies have bloomed. A fine example of a treatment of the term from a historical-linguistics perspective is seen in W. F. Albright's paper in volume 46 of the 1927 *Journal of Biblical Literature*. Much can be said for this method of explaining the semantics of the Hebrew term, yet no conclusive definition can be dogmatically asserted. This is due to the confluence of ancient languages in the time of Jacob; and from a historical perspective, too many various nuances present themselves to the observer for the matter to be settled, not to mention the question which concerns the pointing of the original Hebrew terms.

An ancillary method, is to define the term via its various contexts, which also produces a plethora of possibilities, each displaying a connotated shift in accordance with whichever context the term is viewed. A fine example of this type of examination of the term is seen in the Supplementary Issue of *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 1990, in articles by Otfried Hofus, and J. Christiaan Beker *et cetera*. Another example of this contextual method is seen in the December 1978 issue of the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, in an article by Charles M. Horne of Wheaton College Graduate

School. Such essays as these samples, would have benefited greatly if an etymological approach was **also** employed along with the theological/contextual one. However each essay of each type generates some value, and is useful for the researcher who endeavors to understand the term – **ישראל**.

In this paper an attempt will be made to illustrate that singular monosemic meaning which is inherent in all the usages of our term "Israel". When this meaning is established, students should start with this essential definition, and then add the additional connotations which a context may supply. By observing this unique monosemic meaning some insight can be gained, and some arguments resolved.

Understanding the essential meaning of our word "Israel" is important because it underlies and serves as a nucleus for larger theological perspectives, how one understands God's Word and how His Word relates to us today. To ascertain the essential meaning we shall briefly note some basic dictionary and historical definitions, and then couple these with popular perceptions which stem from certain biblical contexts.

One of the earliest occurrences of our word in a Semitic language is seen near the bottom of the famous Merenptah inscription in hieroglyphics. George A. Barton (*Archaeology and the Bible* – page 376) shows the reign of this Egyptian Pharaoh [Merenptah] as from 1225-1215 B.C.. In the Armana documents circa 14th century B.C., we encounter a disputed term which probably means "Hebrews" who were then upsetting various Palestinian kings with their presence in Canaan. In the Botterweck/Ringgren definition (*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* – page 399, volume VI), we note the ancient use of the word "Israel" as a name of a family or person in a Ugaritic text, and is perhaps seen in several ostraca from Samaria.

The term should be old. In fact it seems like an expected name for various ancient persons as it is a compound of two ancient Semitic words:

GOD – **אל**, and RULE, POWER or MAINTAIN – **ישראל**

However, the above definition for the prefix **יִשַׁר** is hotly disputed, and once it is resolved no consensus can be expected. "El" or "G(g)od [**אֵל**]" is a common ancient Canaanite term for God, a lord or master and is also used as such in the Hebrew Bible, its meaning is clear and well established.

In this paper, the prefix "yshar- [**יִשַׁר**]" is seen as a verb form of the Hebrew. And as Eberhard Nestle pointed out (as seen in Albright's essay – page 159), "the divine element in theophorous names is always subject, and never the object." Some exceptions are noted, but following this dictum we would not translate "Isra-El" as: "struggling against (or, with) God", but rather as "God fighters" or "God perseverers". Viewing "God" as the subject of the verb "Isra- ". For example "Peni-El" of Genesis 32:30 would be translated as "God faces" or, "face of God" (stemming from the Hebrew verb **אֵת-פָּנָי** "in the presence of"), but not "face toward God".

The verbal prefix is sometimes rendered as "straight" or, "uprightness", or typically as a form of the verb **שָׂרָה** ("shar" or "sarah") which can then generate these meanings: "rule", "protect" or "power" as above; and if correlated with the Arabic "shariya" can mean "to persist". As Ralph Marcus pointed out (*Journal of Biblical Literature* – page 150, June 1941, volume LX), it is difficult to arrive at a precise specific meaning from all of the ancient usages, however Albright's "heal" is well argued. In fact here is a brief list of the definitions given to the term by a variety of Biblical scholars in their works:

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|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| C. I. Scofield - prince with power | S. R. Driver - perseverer with God |
| A. H. Sayce - to be upright | Adam Clarke - a prince of God |
| William Gesenius - soldier of God | John Skinner - Striver with God |
| E. B. Pusey - He is a prince with God | Roland E. Murphy - God rules |
| W. F. Albright - God heals | J. H. Kurtz - Prince of God |
| C. F. Keil - God's fighter | A. Gosman - the captain of God |

Hence, we note quite a diversity. As a consequence we look for another or additional way in which to determine the singular specific meaning, we look to the context(s). The above definitions are all connected with one passage, that of Genesis 32:28 wherein the angel gave to Jacob this new name, and indeed even defines the reason why. In the text of Genesis, the 1901 American Standard Version correctly notes that the angel's definition can be rendered in two ways (again depending upon one's view of the relevant verb!), as "striven with God" (the ASV text) or as "had power with" (the ASV footnote). Other versions render it thusly:

as a prince, thou hast power with God - KJV

for you have striven with God - NASB

for thou hast been strong against God - Douay Version

for you have striven with God and humans - NRSV

The ambiguous phrases—"...with God" seem intentional. They can mean *against* God, or *empowered by* God. In deciding, let us pose this question; "did Jacob fight against God" or "with God"?

When Jacob "wrestled" with the angel (a theo-angelic form of God), his "fighting" was more of a "struggle" even a "clinging", the only force exerted was demonstrated in his not letting go. God, the angel, **allowed** Jacob to prevail, and did not exert His power against Jacob. A reminder of Who actually is in power was given to Israel (Jacob) with the nerve damage in his hip. Jacob persevered only because God allowed him to.

Further, we note that it is God Who actually fights FOR Israel, as seen in Joshua 10:14,42 and at Isaiah 38:4 *et cetera*. In effect, Jacob was encouraged clinging to this angel, he needed encouragement, as he was about to cross over and face his brother Esau. In Genesis 32:28 our verb portion of "Isra-el" is a rather rare Hebrew verb signifying "power" (שָׁרָה), the actual verb is also seen in this verse and is used one other time at Hosea 12:3 of Jacob and Esau in the womb. Again Jacob clings, hanging on, not actually "wrestling" but exerting unusual power. In Genesis 32:24 we do find

a verb meaning "to wrestle" but it probably aligns with the Hebrew word for "Jab-bok", not the term "Israel". [as noted in Albright's essay, page 160].

From the period of Jacob's name change onward, we note that it is God Who fights for Israel, it is God Who actually maintains and empowers His people. It is God Who protects His people. When obedient, Israel basked in the protection of a powerful (almighty) God Who blessed and caused them to persevere. In light of this larger context, this writer suggests that the primary meaning of "Israel" is "perseverers of God".

In Genesis 32:28, the Hebrew prepositions **עִם**, are both rendered with the Greek $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$ in the Septuagint translation. Conybeare and Stock (*Grammar of Septuagint Greek*, page 84) demonstrate that this reflects the actual Hebrew meaning of "in dealing with", the Hebrew prepositions do not mean "against", usually they are rendered as "with". In their 1048 occurrences the Koehler and Baumgartner Hebrew dictionary (*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, volume 2, page 839f.) never shows the preposition meaning "against". Thus, in Genesis 32:28 the thought is that Jacob prevailed "**with**" God, not against Him.

Additionally, the two Hebrew verbs with which we are concerned with in Genesis 32:28, are perfect (**שָׁרִית**—striven or, showed power with); and an imperfect (**וְתוֹכַל** – to prevail over), these verbs are juxtaposed in various ways, and the latter one may not have a "ו" preceding it, as noted in *A Preliminary and Interim Report on the Hebrew Old Testament Text Project. Volume 1*, page 49. In Kennicott's work [see bibliography] the second Hebrew verb is omitted in several medieval Hebrew texts. The second verb may also be rendered as a future tense, indicating that Jacob [Israel] would in the future prevail over men [Esau and others]. These fine points revolve around Hebrew grammar, but the context(s) seem to support a future aspect in the second verb form. The Latin Vulgate also renders the second verb as *praevalēbis*, which is a future, active voice, indicative mood verb. The Syriac translation renders the second verb as **ܐܘܠܬܘܚܘܒ** which is an Ethpeel verb form but in a perfect construction, it harmonizes with the first verb, which is also an Ethpeel, perfect, the important point to be noted in this Syriac rendering (Syriac being a Semitic language) is

that both verbs reflect a passive nuance! That is—Jacob is acted upon by God, Jacob is empowered by God! Such is the Syriac text.

The Greek LXX text varies, as printed in Rahlfs edition, only one Greek verb (of the two Hebrew verbs under discussion) is shown, which verb reflects (apparently) both Hebrew verbs, Rahlfs appears as such: [δυνατος, appears to be a "hanging nominative"] Genesis 32:28 (29)

εἶπεν δὲ αὐτῷ Οὐ κληθήσεται ἔτι τὸ ὄνομά σου Ιακωβ, ἀλλὰ Ἰσραηλ ἔσται τὸ ὄνομά σου, ὅτι ἐνίσχυσας μετὰ θεοῦ καὶ μετὰ ἀνθρώπων δυνατός.

A number of LXX manuscripts add a future tense, middle voice verb [ἔσῃ] after "men" or "power". The one verb of the Rahlfs edition is an aorist tense active voice verb. The LXX translators may herein display some confusion as regards their rendering of these two original Hebrew verbs, one being a perfect, and the second an imperfect tense/aspect.

We thus note how several early translations rendered these Hebrew verbs and prepositions, in so doing we have hopefully gained some insight in our attempt to understand just what the literal text and context is conveying to the reader in our day and in times past.

Israel is also used in a variety of other contexts: as a title describing a people called Israel, or for the physical land of the country of Israel, or for the 10 northern tribes as distinguished from the two southern tribes. It is also used in the New Testament for earthly peoples (believers and non-believers) and a heavenly (spiritual) group of believers [Hebrews 12:22, and Philippians 3:2,3]. Most of these usages are self evident, but much theological discussion revolves around the heavenly and earthly Israelites, and involves the church of this present dispensation. [do refer to the essay titled: "The Church Extraordinary!", seen on the website—www.biblical-data.org.]

For example, texts which depict Israel as the tribe descended from the Patriarch Jacob are:

Therefore come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel out of Egypt. Exodus 3:10 [NASB], this usage proliferates in the Old and New Testaments, note also Acts 2:36.

Texts which illustrate Israel as the 10 northern tribes:

..."Have you seen what faithless Israel did? She went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and she was a harlot there..and her treacherous sister Judah saw it." Jeremiah 3:6,7 [NASB]

Texts which illustrate an earthly Israel:

Behold Israel after the flesh.. I Corinthians 10:18a [KJV]

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel. Acts 4:27 [NASB]

Texts which illustrate a heavenly Israel:

But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother, Galatians 4:26 [NASB]

And those who will align to this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, that is – upon the Israel of God. Galatians 6:16 from the Greek.

(note the rendering of the third καὶ as one denoting the explicative mode, "that is".)

Arminians, and the like, picture the Israel in Galatians 6:16, as the "new people" of God. Notably Gordon D. Fee (note: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, page 444), and he, like most holiness peoples, takes this phrase one step further as he then declares that these "new people" of God are the true Israel and serve to fulfill "his [sic, His] promises made to the fathers." This is the typical amillennial or Pentecostal view which does not treat the many passages of Scripture concerning the actual restoration of ancient Israel as literal.

Other non-literal interpretations view modern Israel (that is the Israel as found in the New Testament) as Europeans [Armstrongism], or as a mythological tribe called "Nephites" [Mormonism]. However, many scholars, who consistently view the Scriptures in their plain literal sense (which includes literal allegories, and figures *et cetera*) view the Israel as seen in Revelation as literal genealogical descendants of Israel, which would include proselytes.

One of the consequences of accepting the literal recognition of the New Testament Israel as a restored nation (as often seen in the Old Testament prophecies, and in the book of Revelation), is a theological system often dubbed "dispensational". Dispensationalists include such scholars as: Scofield, Darby, Bullinger, O'Hair, Lewis Chafer, George N. H. Peters, Charles Ryrie, William R. Newell, all of the Feinbergs, J. D. Pentecost, M. R. DeHann—to name a few. The dispensational understanding stands in stark contrast to the amillennial system championed by Arminius, and Charles Finney. Modern spiritualizers of the term "Israel" include: Gordon D. Fee, J. Rodman Williams, Oswald Allis, Carl Henry, Clark Pinnock, George Eldon Ladd, Henry Barclay Swete, *et al.*

Hopefully the reader can now see that how one interprets the meaning of "Israel" can be a major part of, and indicator of their respective theological stance. Genesis 32:28 defines the basic term for us. Yet some linguistic difficulties arise as the words in the context (32:22–32) can be pointed in various ways and hence alter the semantics. In turning to the New Testament, after the destruction of Jerusalem [A.D. 70] and in the later portions of the New Testament (notably the Revelation), the reader will meet again with a people/nation called "Israel". After the "rapture" [ἀρπαζω] of

the heavenly body members of Christ, the Israelites are gathered from many nations into their land (Israel) to experience a "time of Jacob's trouble". This oft prophesied event shows literal Israelites, descendants and proselytes to Judaism returning to a land called "Israel". Some of these regathered Israelites, will convert to "Messianic Christianity", via the Kingdom Gospel. These new converts who are martyred or who live through the tribulation will receive their earthly inheritance, an inheritance which is the subject of many of the ancient Biblical writers and prophets. (Numbers 26:53, Jeremiah 3:18,19, Ezekiel 45:1) .

The "raptured" body members of the body of Christ, receive their heavenly inheritance, and are equipped with special spirit bodies, their inheritance is not the subject of the ancient Biblical prophets, at least not in most senses. The heavenly body members and the earthly body members of Christ will be united in the distant future, (Ephesians 1:10, and noting that "things" is not here a good translation of τα παντα . [I suggest "all humans"]]). Thus, the body of Christ will be complete and manifest.

The alert reader should now deduce that this writer correlates "Israel" with the "body of Christ", with an important qualification. **At this time**, there is not the actual union of the earthly and heavenly portions of the one body, temporary distinctions are in place. Earthly Israelites need to have their promises fulfilled: an earthly inheritance, an earthly 1,000 year millennial reign with their resurrected Messiah, being indwelt with the Holy Spirit, and then inhabiting a new earth. Heavenly body members will fulfill/receive their promises: a rapture and translation, a heavenly awards ceremony, possessing eternal heavenly dwelling places, an inheritance in the light, *et cetera*. Thus, at this time, Israel has two aspects, the earthly and the heavenly, and at this time they have distinct parameters as concerns their functions, worship and commissions. Though distinctions exist in this age, in which only the heavenly portion is being built, there are numerous passages which demonstrate the actual unity of the two groups. For instance compare these two passages:

GALATIANS 3:26

For you are all sons of God through
the faith of Jesus Christ

ISAIAH 1:1,2

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concern-
ing Judah and Jerusalem... for the Lord speaks
'Sons I have reared and brought up.'

If the physical descendants in the Isaiah quote are God's sons, and if the Gentile saints in the Galatian quote are God's sons, then they must be of the same family! Both types, the earthly portion, and the heavenly portion exist via the grace, care and election of God. In the Romans epistle, Paul often argues that it is a selected remnant of Israel in general which will be saved. Not all genetic Israelites are of Israel!

Israel is the people of God, and in various contexts, will contain both believers and unbelievers. They exist (especially the believers) because God has and is and will exert His power to preserve them. They persevere due to God's care, despite Satan's power. At this time believing Israel is divided into two distinct sections, earthly and heavenly. **Both** sections are parts (members) of the one great Body of Christ, which body will be brought together in all of its glory in Ephesians 1:10. At this present time, the distinctions are in place, and even throughout the Book of Revelation the heavenly portion of the Body of Christ is never mentioned or seen, (The heavenly city, the bride in Rev. 21, is the earthly nation of elected Israelites coming down from their temporary abode in heaven to their permanent abode, the new earth).

The 12 apostles of Jesus Christ were/are sent to the earthly portion with a gospel of repentance and water baptism incorporating signs and miracles. The heavenly portion (which is now being built) is a group whose apostle is Paul, and who are baptized **by** (as opposed to "with") the Holy Spirit, no miracles or signs are normally manifested, our Lord is in heaven and we wait not for His return to earth, but rather for us to leave earth prior to His "coming" (παρουσια) which coming accords to Jewish prophecy. Peter, James and John still are obedient to their commission—to the people of Israel (earthly Israelites). Paul was (is) the apostle to the nations without genetic distinctions, which differs from our Lord's commission to the 12 (note Matthew

10:5,6 and Acts 2:22,36) which is to earthly genetic Israelites. These are then to go out and proselyte others to the Messianic Church or kingdom. As per prophecy, they are to begin with their own nation which could then become a light unto the nations, [per Isaiah 60:1-3] only their nation, Israel, rejected the message, and their commission was (is) temporarily superseded by that of Paul's.

Finally, it is Paul who distinguishes between an earthly and a heavenly Israel, none other of the inspired writers do so before Paul's revelations are manifested. Peter and others did later accept the revelations (often related to the "mystery") of Paul, as evidenced in II Peter. In presenting Israel as composed of elect and non-elect, and as heavenly and earthly, Paul advances our understanding of just what the total overall term "Israel" means—it can mean:

- the physical land of Israel
- any of the members of the 12 tribes
- the elected people of God (cumulatively since Adam)
- people who are maintained by God
- people, who will in the *distant future* be joined in some marvelous and mysterious way (a union of the earthly and heavenly).

CONCLUSION

How one interprets the word "Israel" affects and indicates their theological stance. It is a fine barometer for determining their overall understanding of the Scriptures. How one interprets "Israel" can also declare how they understand many Scripture passages: as either literal or non-literal. How one interprets "Israel" usually agrees with their particular religious association—Pentecostal, charismatic, Methodist (non-literal), or Baptist, Lutheran, Dispensational, (literal).

The term "Israel" can be examined via historical linguistics, noting its translation or transliterations into various other languages such as Arabic, Syriac, Greek. These linguistic observations can generate a variety of semantic elements, and are not totally conclusive in themselves. A contextual observation is also required to supplement the

linguistic evidence. When a literal sense is employed in each passage, the observer should be then able to determine just who or what Israel is in each passage (that is, is it the land, people, 10 northern tribes, or a heavenly portion, or a restored earthly portion). If this writers' suggestion is followed herein, the reader may adopt the view that *one* of the usages of "Israel" is synonymous with the phrase "body of Christ" used only by the apostle Paul—in that in the distant future, both of the current divisions of the Body of Christ, (the earthly and the heavenly) will be joined under the Headship of Christ, Colossians 1:18.

Consistent interpretation of which Israel is meant will (should) lead the student to conclude that a temporary distinction now exists between the Israel of prophecy, and that of mystery. Certain portions of Scripture are written TO the earthly Israelites (the books of James, John, Peter, *et cetera*), and certain portions are written TO the heavenly portion of Israelites (the epistles of Paul). All of the Scriptures are FOR all of God's elect, but not every passage is to each person or nation!

The monosemic meaning (the essential and always present meaning) of Israel is—the people whom God maintains, or who persevere via God's care. Various other nuances are added by each contextual usage; for example it is believing Israelites who receive the ultimate care and preservation from God, and in certain passages many of the unbelieving Israelites shared (temporarily) in the benefits bestowed upon the believing nation as a whole. The reader is encouraged to examine each usage of the term "Israel" in a literal manner, and attempt to determine who is speaking, and to whom and about what.

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