The Blessing of the Little Children

Sometimes when we read something in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry we are tempted to think that Jesus has done or said something new because he does not specifically connect it to its antecedent(s) in dealing with the patriarchs or with Israel. The gospel accounts of the blessing of the little children is very good example of that phenomenon.

In Mark’s account, the blessing of the children is sandwiched between a discourse on marriage and inheritance. We often read each of these vignettes independent of one another. Yet there is nothing more familiar to human life regardless of race, nationality or cultural than the natural progression of marriage, procreation and inheritance. When viewed in the context of an integrated linear progression of life, Mark 10 makes more sense. More than that, these familiar life events, Jesus informs us, have a parallel in the story of the Kingdom of our Father. As related in Mark 10, the Father as creator is demonstrating through the actions and words of his own son that He wants a relationship with every child he creates. That relationship is of course, according to his time and purpose. As Mark demonstrates however, it is always through his own son.[[1]](#endnote-1) This context is essential when considering Mark 10 which is really only about one topic – the Kingdom of our Father. From where, then, does the blessing of the children come?

In Genesis 48, there is another account of young children being blessed – boys young enough to sit on the lap of an elderly man. In this account of Jacob blessing the sons of Joseph, we see the very thread of themes in Mark 10. Joseph the faithful husband, married to one wife, an Egyptian, who produced two offspring[[2]](#endnote-2). They are his legitimate heirs being blessed by their grandfather Jacob. Notwithstanding, this event seems anachronistic for perhaps four reasons. One, Jacob is blessing his son Joseph through his grandsons. This is a variation of the prior pattern (Genesis 48:15). Second, the practice was for the patriarch to bless the firstborn legitimate son. Genesis records a blessing being passed from Abraham to Isaac and Isaac to Jacob.[[3]](#endnote-3) Israel’s sons from Leah each in turn disqualified themselves for the blessing of the firstborn and that honor passes to Joseph, Rachel’s firstborn.[[4]](#endnote-4) Fourth, Joseph’s line is not racially or ethnically pure. Joseph’s wife was the daughter of Potiphera, priest of On (Genesis 41:50) an Egyptian. Isaac and Jacob were specifically forbidden from marrying outside their familial line. While this raises a number of questions, the ones we will focus on is why Jacob/Israel blesses Joseph through Joseph’s sons and the nature and purpose of Israel’s blessing upon Ephraim and Manasseh.

By way of background it is important to note a distinction that the scripture makes in the promised blessings that are passed from generation to generation among the Patriarchal family (Genesis 15-49). Sometimes, the promise of certain blessings come from the Patriarch themselves and at other times they come from, the Eternal (YHWH, Elohim or El Shaddai). For example, Abraham’s initial promise of blessing comes from YHWH – the Eternal. He has a later encounter with Adonai YHWH – the Lord Eternal. And then at the age of 99 the Father makes himself known to him as the Almighty (El Shaddai) – the one who will make him fruitful (see footnotes 5 and 6). Elohim, the family God, then makes an everlasting (endless) covenant with Abraham and his offspring.[[5]](#endnote-5) In Genesis 26, the Eternal reveals himself to Isaac and confirms that he and his offspring will be the recipients of the blessings promised to Abraham. In Genesis 28:3 we learn that El Shaddai has revealed himself to Isaac because it is to El Shaddai that Jacob is referred to receive the blessing of a wife. It is El Shaddai who will make Jacob fruitful so that he would become a “company of peoples.” And, in Genesis 35:3, El Shaddai makes himself known to Jacob.[[6]](#endnote-6) In Genesis 35:11, El Shaddai reveals himself to Jacob and his name is changed to Israel.[[7]](#endnote-7) With the exception of Israel’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh, when a Patriarch pronounces a blessing upon his firstborn son, it is exclusively related to the material world. When the blessing comes from God, in whatever state of character or action he reveals himself it is accompanied by a promise of something everlasting or eternal. The only everlasting thing is his Kingdom (Daniel 2, especially verse 44).

Joseph’s promise of blessing is in fact being multiplied – doubled as Israel blesses his sons. More important is the nature of that blessing. In Genesis 32:9, Jacob begins to ask the Eternal for a blessing. That request is preceded by his statement that when he left home he was a company and now returning he was two companies. Jacob has all the material wealth he needs or wants. He is not looking for more wealth but for the Holy Spirit. He is seeking to change and qualify to receive the eternal blessing offered to his father and grandfather – he is making the Kingdom his priority (see also: Hosea 12:2-4 where we are told that what Jacob sought through his struggle with the Eternal was his favor – or grace if you prefer). So when Jacob lays hands on Joseph’s son it is not simply the continuation of the material blessings, nation and company of nations, but the spiritual blessings that flowed from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob and Joseph.

So how do we know that Israel’s blessings for Ephraim and Manasseh are not only about material wealth and national greatness – more than the promise of a nation and company of nations? In verse 4 of Genesis 48, Israel does bless Joseph. Although there is a reference to El Shaddai, Israel is the one conferring the promise of blessing. The language tells us precisely what that blessing was. Joseph was to be fruitful, a people and company of peoples and the land they were to receive was to be an everlasting (olam in the Hebrew) possession. There is only one everlasting possession on the earth and that is the Kingdom set up by Jesus Christ and eventually tendered to his Father (Daniel 2 and other references). So, Israel is at the forefront of both realms – material blessings of wealth and national greatness but also an everlasting kingdom.

In Genesis 48:19, in reference to Ephraim Jacob says he is to become a multitude of nations. The Hebrew for multitude is better translated “fullness.” Ephraim, now Israel’s firstborn is representative of the fullness of the nations. Again, this is a reference to only one Kingdom, the Kingdom of our Father. In total then, through Joseph’s seed, all nations are to receive the spiritual blessings of Israel (Jacob passed down from Abraham through Isaac). It might be said then, that Jesus, the Messiah from the tribe of Judah and the one who holds the scepter, the son of David in a purely physical sense, is, as was his father David, a spiritual son of Joseph through Israel whose spiritual lineage is from Abraham.

Israel is very clear that the lads blessings are through and from Joseph (see Genesis 48:15), just as Joseph’s blessings are from Israel, whose blessings are from Isaac because Abraham his father kept the laws, statutes and commandments of the Eternal (Genesis 26:5). Abraham was not of Israel, he was the standard that defined the brand Israel. Thus the material blessings, wealth and national greatness, and spiritual blessings, the promise of the Messiah out of Judah, flowed from Israel through Joseph’s seed – Ephraim and Manasseh (Genesis 48:6 and later in verse 16) because Jacob/Israel named his name on them as his firstborn. Later in Genesis 48:24, with regard to Joseph’s blessings and the harassment he would suffer we there is a reference to the Shepherd and the Stone of Israel and in subsequent verses the blessings of El Shaddai, up to the “bounties of the “everlasting hills” (verse 26).

More space needs to be devoted to, the two lines of genealogy for Israel. The lineal descendants of Israel – the twelve tribes – and the spiritual descendants. Both John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul speak to the spiritual descendants of Abraham. Most of Isaiah’s prophecy and a fair portion of the other Major Prophets speak of both as well. But our purpose here is to establish the scriptural connection between Israel’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh and the Kingdom and Jesus’ blessing of the children with the Israel’s blessing of Joseph’s sons. It is also important to note that El Shaddai does not make himself known to Ephraim and Manasseh. Their descendants and the descendants of Jacob’s other children rejected any relationship with El Shaddai though Moses brought them just such an opportunity.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In Mark 10, as it relates to the Kingdom, legitimacy of birth – parental, racial, and ethnic – is not at issue. The Father in his time and according to his will wants a relationship with all his children. Further, it is the child like qualities that characterize his Kingdom. Joseph although a faithful husband of one woman had children who were not ethnically pure as were Isaac and Jacob and his brothers. Yet, it is they, Ephraim and Manasseh who are named for Israel. The implication of this is clear; when it comes to a relationship with the Father through Abraham race and ethnicity are not at issue. Intermarrying with non-Israelites does not prohibit one’s ability to benefit from the blessing. The mixed multitude that left Egypt with Israel and presumably, their children settled in the land and, as far as we know, inherited along with whatever tribe they identified. Most certainly there were marriages between Israelites and members of that multitude.

In Mark 10 and its synoptic equivalents, the issue is the same as it is in Genesis 48 – the Kingdom of God. So Jesus does what Israel (Jacob) did. What is important to note at this point, is that Ephraim and Manasseh had not proven themselves spiritually. They were but young boys, yet to be tested like their ancestors and Jacob lays hands on them and confers the Father’s blessings – opens the way for them to begin to have a relationship with the Eternal in the hope that they make a choice to follow the path of their ancestors – the patriarchs. We know how that worked out. But the point is that Jesus does not address repentance or “baptism” on this occasion – the children are too young. He does however signal to them and their parents that his Father desires a relationship with these children, indeed every child, and in the process instructs us all that we must choose to make the Kingdom of God our own just as Jacob did when his name was changed to Israel. The language in the Gospel accounts is revealing. It is not that the children are in the Kingdom. The genitive here is translated differently (but consistently in each gospel account). The Kingdom belongs to the child-like. Implicit of course is the fact that they must elect to be part of that Kingdom. In other words, the Kingdom is their everlasting possession like the everlasting possession promised to Ephraim and Manasseh if they choose it – Ephraim and Manasseh did not make that choice at that time as far as we know. Jesus, in blessing the little children, has again demonstrated that he is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8).

Finally, there is the story of the rich man that inquired about inheriting eternal life – the everlasting possession. He is instructed to divest himself of his wealth and invest in a life in pursuit of Jesus and his mission. It is clear from many other examples in scripture that this is not as much a statement about wealth as it is about choices and priorities. So while this instruction may well have applied specifically to this man, the real point here is that eternal life is a choice that must be primary and that nothing must be allowed to get in the way of that choice.

All of this is about the Kingdom of God and the Father’s desire that, someday, according to his will, every child of his make the choice to possess it. Perhaps more importantly, Jesus’ words and actions make it clear that no man has the authority to limit another person’s access to a relationship with the Father – not even Jesus presumed to take such a prerogative to himself.

1. In the interest of brevity, the many scriptures that validate this point have been omitted. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Joseph had other children. Israel claimed Ephraim and Manasseh for himself and the others were for Joseph. Genesis 48:5-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The line of succession is Abraham to Isaac not Ishmael because Ishmael was illegitimate. The blessing is then passed from Isaac to Jacob despite Jacob’s deception because Esau sold his birthright to Jacob and thus disqualified himself as the legitimate heir. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jacob recounts the disqualification of Reuben, Simeon and Levi in blessing his sons and prophesying about their future. Judah is disqualified for his multiple dalliances and his dishonesty with Tamar (see, Genesis 38). Joseph resists the advances of Potiphar’s wife and is a faithful husband of only one wife. In Western societies even children of a father who has had multiple marriages are entitled to inherit. That was not the case in ancient Israel. Likewise, children of infidelity are bastards and not legitimate heirs. Finally, children of non-Israelites in Israel, like their parents, could not inherit. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. There is no reason to limit the term offspring to a human context. And as we learn from Paul’s letters Abraham has children that while not lineal descendants, share the same spiritual values and are thus considered his offspring (See Romans 4) and his family (Matthew 12:46-50). In fact, the Hebrew is not what the English appears to be. In the English we read a noun but in the Hebrew, the word is a verb – a combination of two root words – to sow and to scatter (consider Matthew 13). Initially, as it relates to Abram it is a promise to sow, or establish, his children in the land of Canaan. But by the time we get to Genesis 48 that promise with respect to Israel is a very different one. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. What is in a name? The following is excerpted from a sermon which was part of a series of sermons discussing Israel and her calling. **3 *c*﻿“You shall have no other gods (els) before﻿*1* me. 4 *d*﻿“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 *e*﻿You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am *f*﻿a jealous God, *g*﻿visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands﻿*2* of those who love me and keep my commandments. 7 *h*﻿“You shall not take (lift or carry about) the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.**

   This statute is written much like one might find statutes written in man’s law. The primary principle is: No other gods before me. The primary meanings of this root as used in Scripture are “god” (pagan or false gods), “God” (the true God of Israel) and less frequently, “the mighty” (referring to men or angels). By far the predominant usage is for the true God. The name “El” is a very ancient Semitic term. It is also the most widely distributed name among Semitic-speaking peoples for the deity, occurring in some form in every Semitic language except Ethiopic. The question of the relationship between the biblical use of *˒ēl* and the Semitic concepts of El has received much attention particularly since the discovery of the Ugaritic texts. The scholars tell us that what these texts establish is the fact that the term El was used in reference to a personal god and not merely as a generic term in the ancient Semitic world. So it should not surprise us that the Eternal’s further instruction to Israel, a Semitic people, is to not make for themselves, a god of their own choosing. He chose them and he alone is to be their El.

   A study of the descriptions that accompany El where the name occurs in Scripture, leads us to conclude that, from the beginning of the use of this term, it was intended to distinguish the true El (God) from all false uses of that name found in other Semitic cultures. The true God’s greatness or superiority over all other gods is referenced in Jeremiah 32:18; Psalm 77:13 and 95:3 where he is “the great El.” In Psalm 77:14 he is “El doing wonders.” In Daniel 11:36 he is the “El of els” (“God of gods).” And in Numbers 16:22 and 27:16, he is “El, the God of the spirits of all flesh.” And, he is the one El (Malachi 2:10). But he is more than the sum of his power he has position and status as well. In Psalm 136:26 he is the “El of heaven.” In Job 31:28 he is the “El that is above.” And in Genesis 14:18-19, 20 and 22 he *ēl ˒elyôn* “El most high.” And scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, most predominantly in the books of Genesis and Job, and in reference to his relationship with the Patriarchs, he is El Shaddai, the Almighty – the El that makes his chosen ones fruitful (see below for scriptural confirmation that “fruitfulness” is something that is exclusively the providence of the Father).

   As if to punctuate the point that he is not a god of our choosing or making, and to, ideally, prevent us from offenses or transgressions from over familiarity, we are told that the true El is “El who hides himself” (i.e. known only by self-revelation, Isa 45;15). Yet, he does see us at all times as Hagar affirmed. Therefore he is “El who sees me” in Genesis 16:13. When the English says that El or El Elyon, or El Shaddai, “appeared” it does not necessarily refer to a literal visual manifestation. (See John 1:18; 6:46 but also John 14:9).

   Of great significance to us are those epithets in scripture that describe him as the Savior God of Israel. He is called the “Faithful El” in Deuteronomy 7:9, the “Holy El” in Isaiah 5:16, the “El of truth” in Psalm 31:5 and Deuteronomy 32:4, El Shaddai, “Almighty El” throughout Job, in Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 48:3; Exodus 6:3 and Ezekiel 10:5), “El the heroic” (Isaiah 9:6 and 10:21), the “El of knowledge” in I Samuel 2:3, the “El of glory” in Psalm 29:3, *˒ēl ˒ôlām* the “El of eternity” in Genesis 21:33, the “Righteous El” Isaiah 45:21 and “Jealous El” in Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 4;24; 5:9; 6:15; Joshua 24:19 and Nahum 1:2. In contradistinction from all false “els” (gods), he is the “Living El” (Joshua 3:10; I Samuel 17:26, 36; Psalm 42:2; Isaiah 37:4; Jeremiah 10:10, 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26 and so on. And in the passage most quoted elsewhere in the Old Testament El is described in terms of those attributes by which God desired to be known by his people Exodus 34:5–7; Deuteronomy 4:31 and Psalm 103:8 – “The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”

   The true El sees himself as our very personal God. Therefore, in using his name we are free to describe him as “El my rock” (Psalm 42:9), “El my Savior” (Isaiah 12:2), “El of my life” (Psalm 42:8), “El the performer on me” or the one who fulfills his purpose for me (Psalm 57:2) and even “My El” (Ps 89:26 – you are my Father, my El and the rock of my salvation). Need protection? He, for you, is “El my fortress” (II Samuel 22:33). Need courage and strength? He is “El the one who girds of me with strength” (Psalm 18:32). He can even be your “El to give you vengeance” (Psalm 18:47 and II Samuel 22:48). The name El is also often used in association with fear and recompense. The term “El” is often combined with or associated with the personal name for God, Yahweh – consequently he forgives and saves. And then there is very special name Elohim which reminds us that there is a family, a Father and a Son with many more children to come.

   What should not elude us at this juncture however is the fact that our prayer, when we pray, is that God’s name be holy and sanctified on earth as it is in heaven. So if we fail to see our Father and our elder brother as the ones who created us, not we them and the Father as the one who chose us and, who, is not a god of our choosing, with an elder brother who through merciful judgment and patient guidance shows us how to pattern ourselves in the image of our Father, then as we live our lives we will fail to see our Father, through his Holy Spirit, as our power and force in life – fulfilling their purpose for us through us. We will go about life attempting to deal with it our way, even as a member of God’s church. Consequently, as we conduct the affairs of our daily lives we will carry about the name by which we are called in vain. When that happens, we will have substituted some god of our choosing and making for the true God, usually that god is us, and we will have violated the first, and greatest commandment. So taking, carrying about or lifting God’s name in vain is not as much about what comes out of our mouth as it is about how we think and behave and whether we truly bow to our Father’s will.

   Until the Father calls someone, appears or reveals himself to someone, they cannot, in any true sense bear his name. So while they may certainly defile and profane the Creators and their purpose as human beings they cannot, in the sense of the statute, take that name in vain because they have absolutely no clue about that name – what it is, or means, or the being who has hidden himself from them. This statute was given first to Israel, a people called to be God’s people and most especially to us who have not simply been called but have been given his spirit and therefore his power to bear fruit. Those who “throw us out of the synagogues” even think to kill us will think they do God service (John 16:1). Jesus says these do not know the Father – he has not revealed himself to them – he remains hidden to them (John 16:2. See also, II Timothy 3:1-5 – where Paul speaks of people who are lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, brutes, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (the Father) – these Paul says hold to an outward form – they cling to an image – of godliness but deny its power. In other words they pattern themselves after an image in their mind, thinking they possess the power to determine their own outcomes, control people and events. In so doing, they make gods of themselves, for themselves, and the result is, they carry about, they bear, God’s name in vain – that is to no good purpose. This scripture is a statement about people called by the Father who are supposed to bear his name and don’t – members of his church. Of course it describes those without the Church as well).

   The transliterated English word of the Hebrew word for name is “sem” (pronounced “shem”) In some passages *šēm Yahweh* is so inextricably bound up with the being of God, that it functions almost like an appearance of Yahweh (Exodus 23:20–21; Isaiah 30:27). The Name has a domain at various spots where YHWH appears – almost like a Christophany (Exodus 20:24 – instruction on building an altar where YHWH’s name was to be remembered; Deuteronomy 12:5 – Israel to seek the place that YHWH would choose to place his name; II Samuel 7:13 – King David to build a house for YHWH’s name). The name of God (in all its variations in Hebrew) signifies the whole of his self-disclosure in his holiness and truth (Psalm 22:22). This Name can be “walked in,” i.e. people are to live according to its teaching (Micah 4:5 – YHWH/Elohim).

   This is from the TWOT:

   **“The name chosen for a child was often descriptive of the parent’s wishes or expectations for the personality that was to mature. This is particularly evident in the renaming process, e.g. Jacob becoming Israel (Gen 35:10).”** So God’s name is not merely a way of referencing him. It is in fact a description of his character, existence, status, presence, power, family, purpose and reputation. It reveals his spirit and his work. The name Elohim reveals to us the family nature of the Eternal. In that family, its members, Father, Son and various ministering spirits each have roles and responsibilities. Should we fail to appreciate that fact we can carelessly or negligently take or carry about God’s name in vain thus negating our prayers. In the modern world of Christianity, and for some time before our age, Jesus Christ has been viewed as the central figure of the New Testament writings. With the advent of the Trinity, the familial roles within the Elohim family were homogenized into the name of “Jesus. He is seen largely, if not completely, to the exclusion of the Father. .” However, John’s entire gospel is devoted to the Father primarily – certainly Jesus ministry, according to John is devoted to his Father. In John 6:46 Jesus tells us that no one has seen the Father but in John 14:9-10, he explains that *t*﻿whoever has seen him has seen the Father. How can you say, Jesus asks, ‘Show us the Father’? **10** Do you not believe that *u*﻿I am in the Father and the Father is in me? Notice what Jesus says of himself: John 5:19-29 – So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, *e*﻿the Son *f*﻿can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father﻿*4* does, that the Son does likewise. **20** For *g*﻿the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And *h*﻿greater works than these will he show him, so that *i*﻿you may marvel. **21** For as the Father *j*﻿raises the dead and *k*﻿gives them life, so *l*﻿also the Son gives life *m*﻿to whom he will. (For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who *j*﻿looks on the Son and *k*﻿believes in him *l*﻿should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” John 6:40). **22** *n*﻿The Father judges no one, but *o*﻿has given all judgment to the Son, **23** that all may honor the Son, just as they *p*﻿honor the Father. *q*﻿Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. **24** Truly, truly, I say to you, *r*﻿whoever hears my word and *s*﻿believes him who sent me has eternal life. He *t*﻿does not come into judgment, but *u*﻿has passed from death to life. (See, Matthew 22:32 for confirmation that the patriarchs passed from death to life. This occurs when El Shaddai reveals himself to them, e.g., Abram – dead – becomes Abraham – alive, etc. See also, John 6:57 – As *o*﻿the living Father *p*﻿sent me, and *q*﻿I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.) **25** “Truly, truly, I say to you, *v*﻿an hour is coming, and is now here, when *w*﻿the dead will hear *x*﻿the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear ﻿will live. **26** *y*﻿For as the Father has life in himself, *z*﻿so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. **27** And he *a*﻿has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. **28** Do not marvel at this, for *v*﻿an hour is coming when *b*﻿all who are in the tombs will hear his voice **29** and come out, *c*﻿those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. Finally, James 1:17 – ﻿Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from *a*﻿the Father of lights *b*﻿with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change and in John 14:16 it is the Father who gives the Holy Spirit. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Genesis 32 tells the story of Jacob meeting Esau many years after the grand deception he and his mother contrived to steal Esau’s birthright. We pick up the story in verse 9: **And Jacob said, *z*﻿“O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who *a*﻿said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ 10 *b*﻿I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant, for with only my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps. 11 Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for *c*﻿I fear him, that he may come and attack me, the mothers with the children. 12 But *d*﻿you said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.’ ”** Jacob prepares a present for Esau and sends his people ahead of him while he remained at Mahanaim – so called because he saw the angels and labeled it Elohim’s camp. That night he got up and sequestered his wives and his children away from him and was left alone. And there he wrestled with the Lord and continued to do so with a dislocated hip. Jacob refused to quit until he received a blessing. And then we read this in verse 27 of Genesis 32:

   **27 And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” 28 Then he said, *i*﻿“Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,*6* for *j*﻿you have striven with God and *k*﻿with men, and have prevailed.” 29 Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, *l*﻿“Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. 30 So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel,*7* saying, “For *m*﻿I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” 31 The sun rose upon him as he passed *n*﻿Penuel, limping because of his hip.**

   The Hebrew root word is sara (say ra). It means I contend, I have power. The TWOT tells us this about that: The verb *śārâ* limits itself to contexts which discuss the struggle of Jacob as he wrestled with the Angel of Yahweh at Peniel… The importance of *sārâ* lies in its derived noun, Israel. The name *yiśrā˒ēl* was bestowed upon Jacob by the Angel of Yahweh himself, after he had wrestled with him all night (Gen 32:24). Hosea provides more detail on that event:

   **Hosea 12:2-4 –  *c*﻿The Lord has an indictment against Judah and will punish Jacob according to his ways; he will repay him according to his deeds.  3﻿In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. 4 He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.**

   So Jacob’s struggle was as much spiritual, in prayer, as it was physical. And in it the patriarch “prevailed.” It is not the case that Jacob defeated God. He prevailed because he finally attained God’s covenantal requirement of yielded submission which was dramatically signaled by his injured thigh. Despite his injury, and no doubt intense pain, he persisted and refused to give up until he had been blessed. You could say that Jacob gave in but he did not give up. The Lord then declared, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, *ya˓ăqōb* supplanter”, but *yiśrā˒ēl* “Israel”; for you have striven, *śārı̂tā* (KJV, for as a prince hast thou power, as if from the root *śar* “prince”) with God and with men and have prevailed” (v. 28, NASB). The name Israel appears 2507 times in the ot as a noun but it can also be an adjective and it appears many more times in the OT in that form. As the name is applied to Jacob it is the Lord’s name of honor for him. And as a result of what was achieved at Peniel, Israel is introduced to El Shaddai.

   Genesis 35 relates the story of Israel’s return to Bethel to build an altar in honor of YHWH. He removes the foreign gods from his entourage and begins his journey back. Once he has arrived, we read this in Genesis 35:9-15:

   **9 God appeared﻿*3* to Jacob again, when he came from Paddan-aram, and blessed him. 10 And God said to him, “Your name is Jacob; *m*﻿no longer shall your name be called Jacob, but *n*﻿Israel shall be your name.” So he called his name Israel. 11 And God said to him, *o*﻿“I am God Almighty:*4* be *p*﻿fruitful and multiply. *q*﻿A nation and a company (congregation or assembly) of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.*5* 12 *r*﻿The land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you.” 13 Then God *s*﻿went up from him in the place where he had spoken with him. 14 And Jacob *t*﻿set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone. He poured out a drink offering on it and poured oil on it. 15 So Jacob called the name of the place where God had spoken with him *u*﻿Bethel.**

   So what is bound up in this brand name Israel? Well, as it applies to Jacob, it summarizes his personal story of persistently contending with the Lord (YHWH), no matter the test or the pain he suffered until he (Jacob) prevailed over himself through yielded submission to YHWH. Prevailing in submission may seem oxymoronic but that is what occasioned Israel’s introduction to the Father – El Shaddai – who makes us fruitful. Jacob’s life experiences are not the same as those of his father or grandfather. What is the same for all three is the requirement to engage the Lord and to persist in contending with him and man to the point where they progress to a spiritual state of self-abandonment, unqualified yielded submission resulting in a fruitful relationship with the Father. That is the Israel Brand. If one wants to know what Israel means, it means that.

   But words are fickle creatures – and that is why we need lawyers – to help us tame them. In Israel’s case, his children naturally became associated to his name. But prior to his death in Genesis 48, we read this: **After this, Joseph was told, “Behold, your father is ill.” So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. 2 And it was told to Jacob, “Your son Joseph has come to you.” Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. 3 And Jacob said to Joseph, *z*﻿“God Almighty﻿*1* appeared to me at *a*﻿Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, 4 and said to me, ‘Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you *b*﻿for an everlasting possession.’ 5 And now your *c*﻿two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, *d*﻿are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine**

   What Israel meant by “shall be mine” is made clear in verses 8-15

   **8 When Israel saw Joseph’s sons, he said, “Who are these?” 9 Joseph said to his father, *f*﻿“They are my sons, whom God has given me here.” And he said, “Bring them to me, please, that *g*﻿I may bless them.” 10 Now *h*﻿the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. So Joseph brought them near him, *i*﻿and he kissed them and embraced them. 11 And Israel said to Joseph, *j*﻿“I never expected to see your face; and behold, God has let me see your offspring also.” 12 Then Joseph removed them from his knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. 13 And Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel’s left hand, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel’s right hand, and brought them near him. 14 *k*﻿And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, *l*﻿crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). 15 And he blessed Joseph and said,  “The God *m*﻿before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, 16﻿the angel who has *o*﻿redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys; and in them let *p*﻿my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; (Israel – overcomer with God) and let them *q*﻿grow into a multitude﻿*3* in the midst of the earth.”**

   This is not, per se, the naming of a nation and Commonwealth of Nations, any more than the instruction in Genesis 1 to multiply and replenish the earth is a commandment to simply go make babies. This is, as the TWOT phrased it a forefather **choosing for a child a name “descriptive of the parent’s wishes or expectations for the personality that was to mature.** That is why the scripture says that Israel “blessed Joseph.” Joseph bore the Israel brand and had demonstrated that. Israel’s prayer for his grandsons was that they carry on that name that identified a brand that had begun with Abraham. Joseph had already demonstrated that he was of the Israel brand. Jacob’s prayer is that Ephraim and Manasseh would join the family in a spiritual sense. However, as we know from history El Shaddai never did reveal himself to them. Jesus came to them for that purpose (See, Matthew 10:5-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. In Exodus 14:31, we are told, upon breaching the Red Sea, that the Israelites “believed” in the Lord and his servant Moses. The word believed is the same Hebrew word that is used in Genesis 15:6 to describe Abram’s trust in the certainty of the promises made to him by that same Lord – YHWH. Unlike their father however, we do not read that Israel’s belief was reckoned to them as “righteousness.” So how is it that Abram’s confidence and trust in the Lord is reckoned to him as righteousness but Israel’s is not? The answer begins in Isaiah 45:15 where we learn that the Elohim of Israel hides himself. Elohim had begun to reveal himself to Abram through YHWH (Genesis 12). Exodus 13 tells us it was Moses mission to be a part of Elohim’s self-revelation to Israel through YHWH (I am today what I am eternally. See also, John 8).

   While everyone’s relationship with Elohim begins with and through Jesus the Christ – I AM – it does not end there. In Exodus 6:2-3 – we read this: And God spoke to Moses and said to him: ‘I am the Lord – Yaweh, and I appeared (revealed myself) to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as God Almighty – El Shaddai, but by my name YHWH, I did not make myself known to them. The scripture does not say that the name YHWH was not known to them, clearly we know, from the record of scripture, that name was known to them. What is being addressed here is the fact that YHWH was not going to act to fulfill the promises regarding Israel in their lifetime. They were not going to “know,” and did not know, YHWH by virtue of witnessing, with their own eyes, his acts and his power to fulfill his promises to them and their descendants

   It was that faith, that belief, and the confident action it produces, the assurance of Elhoim’s involvement and faithfulness to his word, before he acts, and even if he does not within one’s lifetime, that equates to righteousness. They acted as they did, in faith, because Elohim had made himself known to them as El Shaddai – God Almighty in English – that name by which one called of the Father is made fruitful. The Father revealed himself to them. Something the Father did not do with Israel or Jesus would not have had to do it as part of his mission (see, the gospel of John generally).

   El Shaddai is not a name that is ever used in connection with Israel, only the Patriarchs – e.g., 31 times in the book of Job, Genesis 17 and Genesis 49. Each, in their own experience, saw their own transformation take place when El Shaddai reveals himself to them. Jesus speaks of these men in Matthew 22:32. He says: “I am the God of Abraham, I am the God of Isaac, I am the God of Jacob. He (speaking of the Father) is the God of the living not the God of the dead.” So even though these men were dead and buried they had passed from death to life – eternal life. And if you go back two or three verses, you will see that the context is the resurrection. In John 17:3 Jesus reveals this to us: **﻿And this is eternal life, *u*﻿that they know you *v*﻿the only *w*﻿true God, and *x*﻿Jesus Christ whom you have sent.** [↑](#endnote-ref-8)