

Meaning of names 'Israel' and 'Jacob' in the Bible and the Quran

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وَوَهَبْنَا لَهُ إِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ نَافِلَةً ۗ وَكُلًّا جَعَلْنَا صَالِحِينَ ﴿١٢٦﴾ وَجَعَلْنَاهُمْ آيَةً يُهَدُونَ بِأَمْرِنَا وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ فِعْلَ

الْخَيْرِ وَإِقَامَ الصَّلَاةِ وَإِيتَاءَ الزَّكَاةِ وَكَانُوا لَنَا عِبِيدِينَ ﴿١٢٧﴾

“And We gave him Isaac; and Jacob, a son’s son. And We made (them) all good. And We made them leaders who guided (people) by Our command, and We revealed to them the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of charity, and Us (alone) they served;” — ch. 21, Al-Anbiya, v. 72–73

The key work of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement is to provide evidence of the truth of the Holy Quran and of the Holy Prophet Muhammad in the light of knowledge, keeping in mind current events. I would open by asking: Suppose you had an adversary or opponent, who is hostile to you for personal or religious reasons, and you discovered that in his own records he describes one of his forefathers, after whom his family is named, as a deceiver, liar and usurper, what would you do? You would be over-joyed and use this admission against him, proclaiming that your opponent himself admits to be descended from a person known for his dishonesty.

As opposed to this, our Holy Prophet Muhammad was a man of such high principles that he never exploited the foolish statements of the opponents of Islam for his own advantage. Here I am referring to the life and character of Jacob (*Ya’qūb, alai-his-salām*) as presented by the Jews and the Christians. Jacob is the figure to whom God gave the name ‘Israel’, after which his descendants are known as the Children of Israel or Israelites, also known as Jews. In modern times, this name Israel was also selected for the present-day state of Israel.

How Jacob acquired the name Israel

How did Jacob acquire this name? In the Bible, in the Old Testament, accepted by both Jews and Christians as their scripture, which contains an account of the life of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, an incident is related that one night, when Jacob was alone, a mysterious man came to him, and Jacob spent the entire night wrestling with him. When morning came and the man wanted to depart, Jacob told him that he would only let him go if he blessed him. The man, after asking Jacob his name, said to him:

“Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome.” —Genesis, 32:28

Learned and scholarly Jewish and Christian authorities on the Bible are perplexed as to how there could be wrestling between a man and God, and on top of that the man overcomes? However, God disclosed the solution to this puzzle to the unlettered and uneducated Prophet, the Holy Prophet Muhammad, in his revelation. In chapter 73 of the Quran (*surah al-Muzammil*), when the Holy Prophet is commanded to “rise to pray by night”, which is called the *Tahajjud* prayer, he was told:

“The rising (to pray) by night is surely the firmest way to tread and most effective in speech.” —73:6

The words translated as “the firmest way to tread” are *aṣḥaddu wa-ṭ-an* (أَشَدُّ وَطْأً), which mean having the greatest strength to trample something underfoot, and that thing here is the human self. We can say that the wrestling of Jacob during the night was against his lower self to overcome it. It can symbolically be represented as wrestling with God, because, after all, it is God Who has given humans their self. This manner of representation of God is similar to that well-known couplet of poetry by Allama Dr Muhammad Iqbal which we can translate as follows: “Elevate your inner self so high that before issuing any decree of destiny, God Himself asks you: Tell me what will please you.” Obviously in the real sense God never issues any decree of destiny in accordance with the pleasure of a human being.

Meaning of *Israel* in Arabic

If we look for the meaning of the word *Isrā'il* in Arabic, Maulana Muhammad Ali gives an explanation in his Urdu commentary of the Quran, *Bayān-ul-Qur'ān* under 2:40, where the term *Banī Isrā'il* occurs for the first time in the Quran. He writes that its first part, *isr*, means a servant, slave or captive, and the second part *'il* is used in the Bible to mean God. Hence he writes:

“Therefore the literal meaning of *Isrā'il* is Abdullah or the servant of Allah.”¹

¹ We may note here that the word *asīr* occurs in the Quran, 76:8, as meaning a captive or slave, and *asrā* occurs as its plural in 8:67 and 8:70.

How did the modern state of Israel get its name?

Historical record of the time shows that the name Israel was chosen for the modern state of Israel on 12 May 1948, only two days before its proclamation as a sovereign state. The founders of this state held a meeting on that date to discuss various possible names. Other names were suggested first, but these were ruled out as unsatisfactory. In the end it was decided to use the name Israel, but some people at the meeting were still unhappy with it.² In the reference I have given in the footnote here, the name Israel is described as an “unenthusiastic choice”. We may thus say that God compelled them to adopt this name because it means Abdullah, and that one day this nation may decide to become Abdullah in the real sense. This may seem unlikely, or even impossible, but these are among the works of Allah which man cannot comprehend.

Name 'Jacob'

Turning to the name 'Jacob', Muslims will be astonished to learn that according to the Bible, and its Jewish and Christian followers and scholars, the name Jacob means a deceiver and usurper, who tries to take away someone else's rights for himself.³ They explain that it is from the Hebrew word *aqeb*, meaning “heel” which carries the significance of grabbing someone's heel from behind in order to supplant him and usurp his rightful place. The same word *'aqab* is used in Arabic and Urdu to mean something which follows, or comes after or behind.

According to the account of the life of Jacob in the Bible, Jacob was born as a twin. His twin brother was called Esau, and as Esau came out of his mother's womb first, before Jacob, he was the elder brother with birthright of succession to the father. His story in the Bible contains incidents which present him as always trying to rob his older twin brother Esau of his birthright by means of blackmail, deceit and falsehood. That story tells us that the name 'Jacob' justly applied to him because he kept on trying to deceive Esau in order to usurp his birthright and was successful in doing so. In the Bible, at the point where he is given the name 'Jacob' in Genesis 25:26, the translators of the New King James Version add a footnote which says that this name means:

² See the detailed article by Martin Kramer, historian of the Middle East at Tel Aviv University, [at this link](#).

³ See the [Got Questions](#) website, and [Apologetics Press](#) website.

“Supplanter or Deceitful, lit. One Who Takes the Heel.” Other translations of the Bible add a similar footnote here.

In the Bible account, on one occasion when Esau returned from doing hard labour in the fields, and was exhausted and starving, he asked Jacob to give him food. It is then stated:

“Jacob replied, First sell me your birthright. Esau said, Look, I am about to die; so what use is a birthright to me? Then Jacob said: Swear to me first. So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew.” — Genesis, 25:29–34.

On another occasion as related in Genesis 27:1–36, when their father Isaac, a prophet of God, was on his deathbed, and was blind, he told Esau that he wanted to pass on Divine blessings to him and that he should bring him some meat to eat, and he would pass on those blessings to him. In the religion of the Israelites, prophethood went from the father to a son, so Isaac wanted to pass his prophethood and succession to Esau, as being the elder son. Their mother Rebekah overheard the conversation between Isaac and Esau, and when Esau went to the field to hunt an animal to bring meat, she told Jacob to bring food and meat to Isaac and pretend to be Esau and receive the blessings intended for Esau. But Jacob pointed out a problem with this plan. He said to his mother:

“Esau my brother is a hairy man, and I am a smooth-skinned man. Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be a deceiver to him; and I shall bring a curse on myself and not a blessing”.

The mother solved this problem in this way. She took Esau’s best clothes and got Jacob to put those on, and she covered his hands and neck with goat skins. Jacob then went to his blind father and said to him: “I am Esau your firstborn”. He thus told a lie. Isaac asked him how he had come so quickly bringing the meat. Jacob replied: “The Lord your God gave me success”. So, not only did Jacob make a false claim, he presented God as his witness to this falsehood.

Isaac felt Jacob’s skin and said: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau”. But Jacob falsely confirmed to him that he was Esau. So Isaac

blessed him and prayed for him. But shortly after this, Esau returned in order to get the blessing, and discovered that the father had already given it to Jacob. The father said: "Your brother came deceitfully and took your blessing." Esau replied: "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? This is the second time he has taken advantage of me: He took my birthright, and now he has taken my blessing!"

At this point there is again a footnote in the New King James Version to say that the name 'Jacob' means: "*Supplanter or Deceitful, lit. One Who Takes the Heel.*" I also consulted an Urdu translation of the Bible and found that at verse 6 of this chapter the translators had added a subheading *ليقوب کا اسحاق کو فریب دینا*, "Jacob deceives Isaac."

The Quran presents Jacob as righteous to the utmost degree

However, the description of Jacob in the Quran is completely the opposite of what the Bible calls him. Referring to Abraham, the Quran says:

"And We gave him Isaac; and Jacob, a son's son. And We made (them) all good. And We made them leaders who guided (people) by Our command, and We revealed to them the doing of good and the keeping up of prayer and the giving of charity, and Us (alone) they served." — 21:72–73

At another place, mentioning Abraham, Isaac and Jacob by name all together, it says:

"And remember Our servants Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, possessors of power and insight. We indeed purified them by a pure quality, the keeping in mind of the (final) abode. And surely they were with Us, among the elect, the best." — 38:45–47

Again, referring to Abraham, it says:

"And We gave him Isaac and Jacob. Each did We guide." — 6:84

Chapter 12 of the Quran, entitled 'Joseph', narrates the story of Jacob's son Joseph in detail. In that story, when Jacob takes a promise from his ten errant sons, whom he did not trust entirely, he says to them:

"Allah is Guardian over what we say. ... Judgment is only Allah's. On Him I rely, and on Him let the reliant rely." — 12:66–67

If Jacob himself had lied to his own father and deceived him, could he teach his sons these values? Jacob also showed exemplary patience and resignation to God's will when he lost his son Joseph and later this was compounded by the loss of Joseph's younger brother Benjamin. About these losses he said to his other sons: "patience is best" — *fa ṣabr-un jamīl* (12:18, 12:83). That is what the father Israel advised his sons, and it has perhaps a lesson for Israel today.

True meaning of Jacob 'grasping the heel'

The Quran thus fully exonerates Jacob of committing any kind of falsehood and deceit. As to the meaning of his name as given by Jewish and Christian scholars, 'he grasps the heel', just look at the wonderful interpretation given by Lahore Ahmadiyya scholars to this meaning! Maulana Abdul Haq Vidyarthi has explained that it does not mean that he pulls someone down from behind by his heel in order to take his place, but that it means he grasps the heel of his father Isaac and his grandfather Abraham in order to follow them in righteousness.

This meaning is supported by the Quran since it lists their names together. It relates that when Joseph preached his religion to his fellow-prisoners in jail, he said: "And I follow the religion of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob" (12:38). We have already quoted above the statements: "And remember Our servants Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, possessors of power and insight" (38:45), and: "We gave him Isaac; and Jacob, a son's son" (21:72).

The Quran also refers to the glad tidings given by God to Abraham's wife Sarah that she would have a son in the following words: "Then We gave her the good news of Isaac, and coming behind Isaac, of Jacob" (11:71). The Arabic words for "and coming behind Isaac, of Jacob" are: *wa min warā' Ishāq, Ya'qūb*. This indicates that Jacob followed in the heels of his father in treading the right path.

It is perhaps the supreme irony in the religious history of the world, a unique occurrence, that the man Jacob, who was given the name Israel, *after which the people and the state of Israel are named*, is presented in their own scripture as a **deceiver, liar, committer of fraud and usurper**, but that same man is declared in the scripture of the Muslims as **purified and guided by God, one of the elect and the best, righteous, and a model of patience under suffering!** This is the enormous favour done

by the Quran to the Jews and a free gift offered to them by the religion of Islam, that it has exonerated their forefather from their own allegations against him.

If the Holy Prophet Muhammad had been a self-seeking man, putting his own interests first, he would have exploited this portrayal of Jacob's character in the Bible, as well as the similar negative portrayal of many other major prophets in the Bible, for his own ends. He would have pointed out these events to claim that the founders and great figures of previous religions were false, and he himself was the only truthful one, especially as even his detractors of his time had given him the titles of *ṣādiq* and *amīn* (the truthful one and the faithful one). But God revealed to him what all messengers are in the eyes of God. This revelation is in the following words:

“O messengers, eat of the good things and do good. Surely I am Knower of what you do. And surely this your community is one community, and I am your Lord, so keep your duty to Me.” — 23:51–52

All prophets and messengers are declared here to be members of the same group. So the Holy Prophet was saying to the followers of the Bible: If Jacob was a deceiver and liar, then I cannot be truthful and faithful; and conversely, if I am truthful and faithful, then so was Jacob. Past prophets of other religions before him were true and sincere, just like him, and it was their followers who had deviated from the teachings of these holy men. It seems that they had imputed these false incidents of unlawful behaviour to their prophets in order to justify their own misbehaviour of committing wrongdoing, usurping others' rights and other acts of injustice.

Therefore the message of Islam to the followers of other faiths, in particular to the Jews and Christians is this: Your founders were righteous messengers of God, and this Messenger Muhammad has arisen to show you what they were really like, and not as portrayed in your stories. I conclude with the prayer that God may turn the hearts of all people towards the real examples set by all the prophets, both Israelite prophets and non-Israelite prophets.

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