

Who Is an Israelite?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | December 24, 2019



Over this Christmas season, I have enjoyed listening to the holiday songs playing on the radio. As I listened to *The First Noel*, the phrase “born is the King of Israel” struck me especially. I thought, “*Who is a subject of this King? Who is a member of this kingdom? And would members of this kingdom be considered Israelites?*”

I remembered the apostle Paul’s teaching:

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code (Romans 2:28, 29 NIV84).

Does that mean anyone who is renewed in heart by the Holy Spirit is an Israelite?

I remembered that God’s promises were given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and to their descendants. (See Genesis 50:24, Exodus 2:24, Exodus 33:1.)

If Paul is correct in the Romans passage above, then are the descendants more than genetic

descendants?

God told Abraham that he was to be the father of more than just the Jews: “No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:5 NIV84).

After hearing the centurion pleading for the life of his servant, Jesus said,

I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:10-12).

Paul also tells us, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29 NIV84).

Being a descendant of Abraham – an heir to all the promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – is not about genetics; it’s about something else.

When we realize that God created one intelligent species on earth, the human race, and that when Adam chose to take the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, breaking God’s design for life, humanity became infected with a terminal condition that the Bible calls sin. Ever since Adam broke trust with God, every human being has been born with this condition and, thus, all of us need the same healing solution.

The promises to Abraham were the promises of a coming Savior who would provide the healing remedy for all human beings willing to take it. Thus, Paul says:

The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say “and to seeds,” meaning many people, but “and to your seed,” meaning one person, who is Christ (Galatians 3:16 NIV84).

The promise, of course, was the promise of Jesus Christ coming to earth to be the Savior of the world, not just the Savior of those who are genetically related to Abraham. Thus, the Bible says, “For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). It doesn’t say that God so loved the Jews. Of course, God does love the Jews; the point is that His love isn’t restricted to the Jews and His offer of salvation and membership into the family of God is also not restricted to them. God’s grace and healing remedy is offered to *all* human beings.

So what does it mean to be an Israelite? It means we are children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and this means the following:

- Abraham was a man of faith. To be a child of Abraham means that we have the same faith in God that Abraham had.
- Isaac was the son of the promise. To be a child of Isaac means the focus of our Abraham-like faith is upon accepting Jesus, the Promised One, as our Savior. In other words, we genuinely trust

Jesus.

- Jacob was a flawed human, just like us. His name means “deceiver,” and he lived dominated by fear and selfishness. But Jacob trusted God and, in union with God, wrestled with his own selfishness and overcame. Thus, his name was changed to Israel – one who with God overcomes. We become a child of Israel when we have the faith of Abraham to accept and trust Jesus as our Savior and then, in unity with Him, we wrestle with self – overcoming the evil habits, unholy desires, fear, insecurity, and selfishness – until we die to self and experience circumcision of the heart by the indwelling Spirit. In union with God, we overcome. Then our names are changed because our characters are changed. We become children of God – Israelites.

So this Christmas, when you hear “born is the King of Israel,” rejoice knowing that your King and Savior has come, won the battle over sin, provides the remedy for the healing of your heart – and through His Spirit will indwell you, empower you, and renew and recreate you as you choose to exercise your faith in Him.

Merry Christmas, for born is the King of Israel!