The Prophetic Pattern of New Names and the Promise They Reveal

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Why does God rename people? To mark covenant, transformation, and purpose beyond their present identity.

From the very beginning of the biblical narrative, we are taught that names are never arbitrary. Again and again, the names given to individuals in scripture seem to do more than describe the character's name—they declare the potential, calling, or covenant of the person. Abraham, Israel, Peter—all these names arrive like mile markers in a soul's unfolding journey. And while not every name in scripture carries this weight, the pattern appears often enough, and with enough narrative clarity, that it's difficult to ignore. There's something consistent happening here, something deliberate. When we begin to trace these moments side by side, as shown in the concordance chart below, what emerges is a pattern too striking to dismiss as coincidence. The giving of a new

name is an invitation from God, a glimpse into how They see us, and a reminder that who we are is not fixed, but unfolding.

This linguistic pattern stretches from the earliest chapters of Genesis to the final visions of Revelation. Names are given, changed, or restored to reflect sacred purpose. And frequently, they are not the individual's original names. They are new names that have been bestowed by God or by His servants at moments of covenant, calling, or transformation. This pattern reveals something inspiring about how God works with His children. He offers them invitations to step into a higher role and gives them names aligned with their eternal identity. These names aren't given based on human merit or mortal status. They are inspired. When a soul embraces the divine call, and when their identity begins to shift, the name follows. In every scriptural example, the new name looks forward, not backward. It is a sacred gesture, an act of vision, through which God reveals how He sees the individual and who they are meant to become.

The First New Names in Scripture: Adam and Eve

Consider Eve. In Genesis 2, when the woman is first introduced into the garden narrative, she is not called Eve. That name comes later, after she embraces her role and partakes of the fruit. Her first title is *ezer kenegdo*, a Hebrew phrase commonly rendered as "help meet." But this is not a faithful translation. It preserves an archaic English rendering and fails to achieve what linguists call dynamic equivalence, a translation that accurately conveys the meaning and intent of the original phrase. The word *ezer* does mean "help," but it appears only twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible, and in every case, it refers to a form of divine or salvific assistance. Most often, it describes God's own saving intervention. What makes this even more significant is that Hebrew offers many other words for "help" or "assistance" that appear throughout scripture. The deliberate use of *ezer* here suggests something intentional, as this is not ordinary help, but the kind associated with deliverance, rescue, and power.[1]

The second word, *kenegdo*, often flattened in English as "meet," is better understood to mean "corresponding to" or "equal in strength." Together, the phrase *ezer kenegdo* doesn't describe a subordinate as tradition has implied, but a powerful counterpart, a sacred partner sent to resolve an eternal dilemma.

Linguistically, *ezer* is tied to Ebenezer, meaning "stone of help," a term used in 1 Samuel 7:12 to mark divine deliverance. This isn't coincidental. The language itself frames the woman's role as salvific. She is the solution.

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Importantly, Eve is not commanded to refrain from partaking of the fruit. That instruction is given to Adam. And immediately after that commandment is recorded, the very next verse introduces Eve as the solution. This sequence follows a recognizable narrative structure known as the epiphanic arc: first, the divine dilemma is stated, "Thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17). Then comes the answer, "I will make him a help meet" (Genesis 2:18). The help is not logistical. It is redemptive. She is a savior figure, foreordained to take the step Adam could not.

She is not a subordinate, despite what traditional readings might suggest. She is not the cause of the Fall. She is, according to the structure of the story and the language it uses, the answer to the problem that God Himself declared.

Her new name, Eve, comes later, and understanding when and how that name is given matters. It is not an act of dominance by Adam, as has been the narrative most commonly recited and accepted without question. The linguistics of the chapter reveal it is a recognition of her calling. The name itself is referenced by God throughout the chapter in His use of the word Chavah, Hebrew for "life." Adam then recognizes her as "the mother of all living" (Genesis 3:20).[2] That root, *chayah*, is used throughout scripture to signify the giving and preserving of life.[3] Her name should not be seen as a mark of shame. It is a witness to the role she accepted. Eve's name should not be a reminder of the Fall. It is a record of her calling.

Just as Eve received a new name after stepping into her divine role, Adam, too, was given a new name following the Fall. According to a revelation taught by Joseph Smith and later recorded in Heber C. Kimball's journal during the Nauvoo Temple meetings on December 28, 1845, Adam's name changed after he partook of the fruit and embraced his new condition. "When Adam was in the garden, he was called Adam," the entry

records, "and when he was driven out and became as one of the Gods, he received a new name." Joseph further taught that this new name followed a pattern—it was given "after some ancient man who had the priesthood" and was tied to "things past, present, and future." In other words, Adam's new name signified more than a moment. It aligned him with a covenantal identity that spanned time and eternity.[4]

This is where the pattern begins: names given by God that signal calling, identity, and potential. The pattern that started with Adam and Eve continues on through every prophet, every covenant, and every follower willing to accept what the Lord sees in them.

The Calling of Abraham and Sarah

If you were reading the story of Abraham and Sarah for the first time, you might not think much of the name "Abram." It means "exalted father," which seems noble enough. But the problem is that Abram didn't have any children. And the longer the story goes, the more the irony builds. For decades, his name stood as a contradiction, an almost painful reminder of the one thing he and his wife, Sarai, could not achieve. Then, at age ninety-nine, something changes.

In Genesis 17, God renews His covenant with Abram, but He also does something unusual. He changes his name. "No longer shall thy name be called Abram", God says, "but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee" (Genesis 17:5).[5] It is as if the new name speaks into being what the old name could only long for. Abraham means "father of the multitudes." The name comes with a promise and a future.

Sarai's name also changes. She becomes Sarah, a shift from the name meaning she will one day become "my princess" to the fulfilled title of royalty, "princess."[6] But the point is not semantics. The point is scope. Sarah is no longer tied to one family. She is now the mother of nations, princess of the Almighty, just as Abraham is the father of them. The name marks the transformation. It is not that their story changes, it's that their identity changes. God sees something in them that they could not have imagined for themselves, and He names it into reality.

This moment is more than symbolic. It introduces a pattern that will repeat again and again in scripture: a person receives a new name when they enter into covenant and step into their calling.[7] Names, in this light, are not just reflections. They are revelations. Abraham and Sarah were not simply renamed. They were redefined.

Jacob Becomes Israel

Jacob's name tells you everything you need to know about him. When he's born, he grabs his twin brother Esau's heel, and so they call him Yaakov, which sounds like "heel" in Hebrew. But it also implies something more layered: one who supplants, deceives, or gets ahead by grasping. And Jacob does just that. He bargains for Esau's birthright, tricks his father Isaac, and flees for his life. The name fits. It's not flattering. But it's true.

And then comes the night everything changes.

It happens on the far side of the Jabbok River. Jacob is returning home after years away. He's wealthy now and the father of many, but he's about to face Esau again. He's afraid. He sends his family across the river and remains behind. Then, scripture tells us, "a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day" (Genesis 32:24). But this is no ordinary man. The language of the passage and the tradition surrounding it suggest something more. The figure is later identified in Jacob's own words as God Himself. The encounter is not a struggle. It is an embrace. It is the moment when Jacob is finally held and acknowledged by the Lord.

It is spiritual. Jacob is no longer fighting for survival. The linguistic emphasis is that he is receiving recognition. He is known. And in that embrace, he receives his new name.

"Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed" (Genesis 32:28).[8] The name Israel means "he who wrestles with God" or "God prevails." It is a name born of closeness and identity, not struggle. This moment becomes a turning point for Jacob, as well as for the people who will come from him. His new name becomes theirs. He is no longer the one who grabs and deceives. He is now the one who was held, acknowledged, and renamed by God.

And yet, the narrative doesn't drop the name Jacob immediately. In fact, both names are used for him going forward. He carries the tension of both identities, just like the rest of us do, old names and new ones, old habits and new callings. But the key is that the blessing and the future belong to Israel.

Simon Becomes Peter

Jesus was known for seeing people as they were, but even more, He saw them for who they could become. When He first meets Simon, the Galilean fisherman, He doesn't ask questions. He doesn't explain who He is. He simply gives Simon a new name. "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas" (John 1:42).[9] It happens without fanfare. Simon hasn't preached a sermon, performed a miracle, or even agreed to follow Him yet. But Jesus sees past the nets and the temperament and speaks to something deeper. He names him Peter, the rock.

In Greek, Petros. In Aramaic, Cephas. The name suggests steadiness, foundation, permanence. All the things Simon was not known for. But this wasn't a compliment. It was a calling. The Lord was speaking not to the man standing in front of Him, but to the man Simon would become if he accepted the invitation to follow.

> What all of these stories share is a pattern: when God calls someone into covenant, into identity, into purpose, He gives them a new name.

Later, when Simon bears testimony, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus reaffirms the name. "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).[10] Whether the "rock" referred to Peter or to his testimony has long been discussed by scholars. But what matters here is that the name is sealed with purpose. The Lord does not back away from it.

And Peter falters. He sinks while walking on the sea. He argues with the Lord. He denies knowing Him three times. And after the crucifixion, he returns home. But not as Peter, as Simon. The text itself reflects this: linguistically, he is referred to again as Simon, not Peter. It's as if the narrative acknowledges his retreat into the identity he once knew.

But then, the resurrected Christ returns. Not to rebuke, but to restore. "Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?" He asks it three times, each question echoing the three denials. And each time, He follows with the same commission: "Feed my sheep."

It's only after that exchange, after Simon accepts the charge, that the name Peter returns and stays. From that moment forward, he is never called Simon again. The name Peter wasn't given for who he was. It was spoken as a calling and sealed through covenant. That's how the Lord names. Not by where we've been, but by where He's calling us to go.

Saul Becomes Paul

Some name changes are dramatic. Others are subtle. And then there's Saul, who seemed to change everything.

When we first meet him, Saul is zealous, brilliant, and feared. A Pharisee of Pharisees. A man so convinced he is doing God's will that he persecutes the earliest followers of Christ with a kind of righteous fury. His name, Shaul, connects him linguistically to King Saul of the Old Testament, a man chosen, prominent, and powerful, yet ultimately fallen. The name fits. At least, at first.

Then comes the road to Damascus.

It is not just a conversion story. It is a reorientation of his identity. Saul is struck down, blinded, and then called by name. "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" The voice isn't from an angel or a prophet but from the risen Lord Himself. And from that moment on, everything changes.

What's often missed is that the name Paul doesn't appear right away. He is still called Saul even after his baptism, even after his sight is restored. But by Acts 13, during his first missionary journey, the shift appears: "Then Saul, who also is called Paul …" (Acts 13:9).[11] The transition is so smooth, so understated, it can seem like a footnote. But it isn't.

The name Paul, or Paulos in Greek, means "small" or "humble." It is the opposite of how Saul once carried himself. Scholars debate whether the name change was intentional or

cultural, perhaps reflecting his work among the Gentiles. But the symbolism speaks louder than the scholarship. He has gone from seeking to make others small in the name of God to making himself small in the service of Christ.

He refers to himself as the "least of the apostles." He writes that God's strength is made perfect in weakness. And though scripture never records a dramatic renaming like Abraham or Peter's, it is clear Saul accepted his charge and was then given the new name Paul in this transformation. After that quiet shift in Acts 13, he is never called Saul again.

The man who once hunted Christians becomes the man who writes most of the New Testament. The name that once represented pride and power is laid down and replaced by one that reflects humility and discipleship that comes from only following Christ.

The Rejection of the New Name Naomi for Mara (But Not for Long)

Naomi was the new name given by God, but rejected in grief. When Naomi returned to Bethlehem after losing her husband and two sons in Moab, she didn't come back with the new name she had left with. The townspeople still called her Naomi, which in Hebrew means "pleasant" or "sweet." But she stopped them.

"Call me not Naomi," she said, "call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me" (Ruth 1:20).[12]

Mara means "bitter." A name she chose herself. It reflected how she felt in that moment, empty, afflicted, and undone. And that's what makes this example so deeply human. Naomi didn't stop believing in God, but she saw herself through the lens of her loss and rejected her new name for her own chosen name. In her eyes, her name no longer fit. So she renamed herself.

But what's so interesting is that while the scriptures record her request, they never fully adopt it. The narrator continues to call her Naomi, and by the end of the book, so do the people around her. Her bitterness is real, but it's not final.

Her daughter-in-law Ruth stays with her. Boaz redeems her family line. A baby is born, and the women of Bethlehem tell Naomi, "There is a son born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17),

not Mara. Her story begins in sorrow, but it ends with restoration. And her new name, the one that means sweet, is the one that survives.

Though life can deal the bitter blows that cause us to reject the calling God has in store for us, the plan is perfect. Some new names are part of a journey, not a destination. Naomi's story reminds us that pain may shape how we see ourselves, but God never forgets who we truly are.

A Name and a Future

All throughout scripture, names are never just names. They are given with intent. They mark transitions. They reveal identity and speak to God's callings.

Sometimes a new name comes from God directly, like when He renamed Abram and Sarai or called Simon by a new name before he ever followed. Other times, like with Naomi or Adam, we are not given the moment God gives them their new names. And sometimes, as with Paul, the change is quiet, almost unannounced, but no less transformative. What all of these stories share is a pattern: when God calls someone into covenant, into identity, into purpose, He gives them a new name.

These names point forward. They are never about who someone was. They are about who they are becoming.

In Latter-day Saint theology, we believe this pattern is not just historical, it's eternal. In the Book of Revelation, the Lord promises the faithful, "To him that overcometh … I will give a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it" (Revelation 2:17). As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland taught, "In the temple we are given new names, new identities, new covenants, and new responsibilities. We are told who we really are and what we must do to return to our Father in Heaven." That promise echoes every story we have traced, from Eden to Galilee to the gates of Bethlehem. The new name is sacred, a witness of heavenly grace. God knows who we are, but more so who we can become. And in His time, He names it.

In the end, the new name is not just a change. It is a calling. And it comes with a choice: will we grow into it?

Person	Original Name	New Name	Meaning & Significance	Initiated By
Abram	Abram – "Exalted father"	Abraham – "Father of many"	God changed Abram's name to confirm His promise to make him father of a multitude. The new name declared Abraham's calling as patriarch of many nations.	God (Genesis 17:5)
Sarai	Sarai – "My princess"	Sarah – "Princess"	God changed Sarai's name when announcing Isaac's birth. Sarah signifies a princess to all people, not just one family. This affirmed her role as the mother of nations and that kings would come from her.	God (Genesis 17:15)
Jacob	Jacob – "Supplanter/heel-grabber"	Israel – "He struggles with God"	After Jacob wrestled with God, God renamed him Israel. This marked Jacob's transformation from a deceiver to one who prevails with God. The name Israel, containing God's name (El), bestowed a new spiritual identity as the ancestor of God's people.	God (Genesis 32:28)
Hoshea (Joshua)	Hoshea – "Salvation"	Joshua – "Yahweh is salvation"	Moses renamed Hoshea, son of Nun, to Joshua (Yehoshua) before sending him to scout Canaan. By adding God's name ("Yah"), Joshua's name meant "the LORD saves," foreshadowing that God would save Israel through his leadership. (Joshua indeed led the conquest and was a precursor of Yeshua/Jesus.)	Moses (Num. 13:16) – by divine direction
Gideon	Gideon – (meaning "Hewer" or	Jerubbaal – "Let Baal	After Gideon destroyed his town's Baal altar, the people nicknamed him Jerubbaal, saying, "Let Baal contend against him" (Judges 6:32). The name mocked the powerless idol. It signified Gideon's new identity as the challenger of Baal, champion of the Lord. (Scripture later prefers	Israelites (Judges 6:32)

References:

(1) The Hebrew word ezer (עֵזֶר), Strong's H5828, appears 21 times in the Old Testament. It is used twice in Genesis to describe the woman as a "helper" (Genesis 2:18, 20). In the other 19 instances, ezer refers either to God or military support, emphasizing deliverance, strength, and divine aid. For example, in Deuteronomy 33:29, God is described as the "shield of your help," and in Psalm 121:1–2, the psalmist declares, "My help comes from the Lord." See Strong's Concordance at BibleHub: https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5828.htm.

(2) The name Chavah (Eve) is introduced in Genesis 3:20 and derives from the Hebrew root chayah, meaning "to live." For further interpretation of this naming, see FaithGateway, "Names Reveal Value and Meaning," Esther Fleece Allen, and BibleHub commentaries on Genesis 3:20.

(3) Matthew L. Bowen, "Eve and the Name of the First Woman: A Study in the Hebrew Roots of Life and Living," Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship 10 (2014): 27–61. https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/eve-and-the-name-of-the-first-woman-a-study-in-the-hebrew-roots-of-life-and-living/

(4) Heber C. Kimball journal entry, recorded by William Clayton, December 28, 1845, Nauvoo Temple Holy Order Meetings, as cited in The Nauvoo Temple: Sacred Structures and Holy Ordinances (BYU Studies/Church Historian's Press). The quote emphasizes that Adam received a name from an ancient figure who held the priesthood and that names given in sacred settings reveal eternal dimensions of time and purpose.

(5) Genesis 17:5 reads, "Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee." The name Abram means "exalted father," while Abraham adds the element of "multitude" or "many nations." For etymological commentary, see BibleHub: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/17-5.htm and Strong's Concordance, H87 (Abram) and H85 (Abraham).

(6) Genesis 17:15–16 records Sarai's renaming: "As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her…" The name Sarai means "my princess," while Sarah is interpreted as "princess," implying a broader, national matriarchal role. See TheTorah.com and BibleHub commentaries on Genesis 17:15.

(7) For a theological overview of name changes as covenant markers in the Hebrew Bible, see FaithGateway, "Names Reveal Value and Meaning," by Esther Fleece Allen; also The Meaning of Names in the Bible, Jewish Theological Seminary, and BibleHub commentaries on Genesis 17.

(8) Genesis 32:28: "Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed." The name Jacob (Hebrew Yaakov) is connected to *akev*, meaning "heel," and carries connotations of deception or supplanting (see Genesis 27:36). The name Israel (Yisra-El) is interpreted as "he who struggles with God" or "God prevails." Many commentaries, including TheTorah.com and various midrashim, affirm that the "man" Jacob wrestled with was a theophany—a physical manifestation of the Lord. See BibleHub: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/32-28.htm.

(9) John 1:42: "And when Jesus beheld him, he said, "Thou art Simon the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is by interpretation, A stone." The Aramaic Cephas and the Greek Petros both mean "rock" or "stone." This renaming occurs at their first

meeting, emphasizing Jesus' pattern of declaring one's future role through name before that role is fulfilled. See BibleHub commentary: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/1-42.htm.

(10) Matthew 16:18: "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Interpretations differ on whether "rock" refers to Peter himself or his testimony of Christ, but the repeated affirmation of the name signifies a divine commission. See commentaries from BibleHub and thematic exploration in FaithGateway, "Names Reveal Value and Meaning," Esther Fleece Allen.

(11) Acts 13:9: "Then Saul, (who also is called Paul), filled with the Holy Ghost, set his eyes on him …" This is the first time the name Paul is used. The Greek name Paulos means "small" or "little." Though not explicitly framed as a divine renaming, the switch in names marks a permanent transformation in identity and mission. See BibleHub commentary: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/acts/13-9.htm and Strong's Concordance, G3972 (Paulos).

(12) Ruth 1:20: "And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." The name Naomi (נָעֳמִי) means "pleasant" or "delightful," while Mara (מָרָא) means "bitter." Naomi changes her own name in response to grief, but scripture continues to refer to her as Naomi, signifying that her identity in the covenant is ultimately preserved. See BibleHub: https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ruth/1-20.htm.

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