

Who is a Jew?

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ *Yeshua*:

The first mention of the Jews in the Bible occurs in the second book of Kings, which describes the fall and captivity of Judah. *"Now it came to pass in the ninth year of his reign, in the tenth month, on the tenth day of the month, that Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and encamped against it; and they built a siege wall against it all around. So the city was besieged until the eleventh year of King Zedekiah... But it happened in the seventh month that Ishmael the son of Nethaniah, the son of Elishama, of the royal family, came with ten men and struck and killed Gedaliah, the Jews, as well as the Chaldeans who were with him at Mizpah."* (2 Kings 25:1-2 & 25, NKJV).ⁱ

We need to understand the overall history of Israel up to this point. The Kingdom of Israel was established by King David from 1010-970 B.C.ⁱⁱ After his death, King Solomon built the First Temple in Jerusalem. After Solomon's death in 931 B.C., Israel was divided into two kingdoms. Judah and Benjamin in the south, and the remaining ten tribes of Israel in the north. The kingdom of Israel was destroyed in 722 B.C. by the Assyrians, and the ten northern tribes were scattered into captivity. From 597-582 B.C., Judah and Jerusalem were destroyed in a series of invasions by King Nebuchadnezzar. The remaining Israelites were taken into captivity to Babylon.

Therefore, the Jews first mentioned in scripture were the descendants of the tribe of Judah, who occupied that land around Jerusalem known as Judea. Later, around 538 B.C., during the time of Ezra, the Judeans (*Yehudim*, יהודים) returned from Babylon to rebuild the Temple. It should now be obvious that the word *Jew* is a derivation of the Hebrew word *Yehudah* (Judah). This raises another question. Is the modern-day reference to Jews akin to a nationalistic reference to Israel? There is not a single reference to Jews in all five books of Moses, Psalms, Proverbs, and nearly all the prophets (excluding Jeremiah and Daniel).ⁱⁱⁱ

In the New Testament, we can see a shift in terminology regarding the Jews. *Yeshua* was called both the King of the Jews and the King of Israel. The Apostle Paul referred to the Jewish people as Hebrews, Israelites, Jews, and those of the circumcision.^{iv} There are several plausible explanations, the most likely being that the nation of Israel (ten northern tribes) was not fully restored after the Assyrian captivity. Therefore, most living in Israel during the time of *Yeshua* were Judeans, who had returned after the Babylonian captivity.

Today the Jewish people are exclusively referred to as Jews, whether they practice Judaism or not. A Jew is any person born of a Jewish mother or has undergone conversion to become a proselyte, according to *Halachah* (Jewish law).^v Those who are citizens of Israel are officially called Israelis.^{vi} However, not all Israelis are Jewish, as we have previously learned. The complex history of the Jewish people has created a dichotomy for those of us who are natural descendants of Abraham and believe that Yeshua is the Messiah of Israel. Are we called Jews, Hebrews, Israelites, or now just Christians?

And what about the Gentiles (those of the nations) who believe in Yeshua as their Messiah? Have they now become Jews? Or has all of humanity who believe in Yeshua now become a global community of Christians, a new people? Those who believe so often reference Paul, who said, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (Galatians 3:28). *"For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love"* (Galatians 5:6). *"Behold, I make all things new..."* (Revelation 21:5).

This erroneous viewpoint, however, would imply that God has somehow done away with the Jewish people, and for that part, Israel as a distinct people group within the larger community of believers. And still, Israel is mentioned over 2,300 times in the Old Testament, including over 500 times in the prophecies, and 85 times in the New Testament.

The only way to rationalize these innumerable references to Israel is to somehow either assume that the prophecies have already been fulfilled regarding ancient Israel, or that the prophecies are spiritual metaphors for the new spiritual Israel, which is the church. The theological term for this is *supersessionism* or *replacement theology*. Again, both are wrong.

I believe there is something profound in the Lord's eyes for those who are from the natural lineage of Abraham. Paul said, *"...concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers"* (Romans 11:28). This verse implies that Israel is elected (chosen) by God. Chosenness is deeply misunderstood. To be chosen means to be entrusted with a role, a task, or a mission that is greater than your small self as an individual. Chosenness means to have both meaning and destiny; a greater purpose that is God-given rather than self-motivated.

Paul said, *"For so the Lord has commanded us: I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, That you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth"* (Acts 13:47). Israel's irrevocable calling was and is to be a light to the nations.^{vii} Divine choice has carried Israel to a whole new level. When God assigned Israel her purpose, she became the fulfillment of that purpose in the form of a nation.

And here is the great mystery. Once you are in, there is no way out, and our Jewish identity, once imputed by the Lord, can never be erased. There are no atheist Protestants, Catholic Muslims, or Hindu Christians. However, there are Jewish atheists, Jews that have converted to Buddhism, Islam, and other religions, and of course, Jews who believe in Yeshua. In other words, a Jew cannot suddenly become an un-Jew by changing his or her religion.^{viii}

Therefore, is Jewishness a tribal identity, ethnic affiliation, or religion? From what we have just read, it does not seem to fit any of these categories. God chose the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which might imply a tribal identity or ethnic affiliation.

However, He never precluded others from joining Him through Israel, where it is written, *"And when a stranger dwells with you and wants to keep the Passover to the Lord, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as a native of the land"* (Exodus 12:48). A native of the land implies the right to inherit the land from the tribe he joined. This verse infers equality between the native-born and the proselyte (the stranger, *ger* in Hebrew) who joined himself among God's people.

Jewishness, therefore, is something much greater than tribal identity, ethnic affiliation, or religion. It implies citizenship, and not just citizenship in any nation, but specifically citizenship in the Kingdom of Israel, which is effectively also the Kingdom of God.^{ix} Yeshua said, *"My kingdom is not of this world..."* (John 18:36). *"But you are those who have continued with Me in My trials. And I bestow upon you a kingdom, just as My Father bestowed one upon Me, that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel"* (Luke 22:28-30).

In a Kingdom, the King makes you his subject. Our identity is in the King, and our relationship with Him establishes our citizenship in the Kingdom. The Lord said, *"He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name"* (Revelation 3:12).

Citizenship in the Kingdom of God first requires God's covenant. The Jewish people are unique in this regard because we are the only nation on the face of the earth to be formed by God's covenants. Second, it requires God's chosenness. The Jewish people are also unique in that we are the only people group to have been chosen by God to become His nation and Kingdom. It is written, *"Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying: You only have I known of all the families of the earth..."* (Amos 3:1-2).

Jewishness is inherited in the same way that citizenship in the Kingdom of God is inherited. You must be born into the Kingdom or born of a parent who is already a citizen of that Kingdom.^x For this reason, no person can become a citizen of the Kingdom unless they first become a child of God. Yeshua said, *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God"* (John 3:3), implying that no person can become a child of God unless they are born anew of the Spirit of God. John said, *"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name"* (John 1:12).

The Jewish people are the rightful heirs to the Kingdom of God.^{xi} However, God has the right to define the terms of His citizenship, and He has the right to expand it.^{xii} In this case, God's term for citizenship requires each of us to be in Christ, born again of the Spirit of God. Therefore, we

are called heirs to the Kingdom. As heirs, we receive our inheritance through citizenship in the Kingdom of God. *"Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?" (James 2:5).*

Regarding Israel, the natural heirs, Paul said, *"For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, "In Isaac your seed shall be called." That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed" (Romans 9: 6-8).* While citizenship in the Kingdom of God was promised to the Jewish people, it also implies a sense of responsibility between citizens and certain privileges that, under the Old Covenant, were conditional. The New Covenant is the fulfillment of these, now, unconditional promises which are in Christ Yeshua.

Therefore, to inherit the Kingdom, the Jewish people are required to come under the Lordship of their King, Yeshua. Refusing His Lordship is akin to rejecting the promise of His citizenship. They are still Jews (God's chosen people), but they have refused to submit and have, therefore, renounced their citizenship. For this reason, they will receive a stern judgment from God. Yeshua said, *"Many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness" (Matthew 8:11-12).*

Yes, because of Israel's unbelief, some of the natural branches have been cut away and removed, and branches from the nations have been grafted, contrary to nature, in their place. Paul said it like this, *"If some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Romans 11:17-18).*

Being grafted into God's Kingdom does not require the Gentiles to become Jewish. However, it does impart to them a degree of Jewishness, in other words, a Jewish heart. The foundation of the church, which is the Kingdom of God, is Jewish, or as I prefer to say, Hebraic. Paul referred to the Kingdom as the *Commonwealth* of Israel, the definition of which is "an aggregate or grouping of communities, bodies, or countries with shared interests."^{xiii} Israel was *one* nation comprised of twelve independent tribes. Therefore, the Kingdom of God is also *one* nation comprised of every tribe and tongue and people.^{xiv}

We have already seen how God's new and everlasting covenant has been opened to the Gentiles. For this reason, Paul says that God has also chosen the Gentiles; as it is written, *"Even us whom He called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?" (Romans 9:24).* God's covenant and His chosenness with all who are in Christ make us equal sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. Therefore, Paul says, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).*

One last extremely important detail. The Jewish people were not just called to be a nation. We were commanded to be a family. Yeshua said, *"For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven*

is *My brother and sister and mother*" (Matthew 12:50). Family members have a unique relationship and responsibility towards each other.

You will often hear a person say, "I would give my life for my child, my mother, and father, or my brother and sister." It is written, "*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself*" (Philippians 2:3). Yeshua set this standard for His family, "*Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends*" (John 15:13).

The bond with our natural kin is strong. How much more should it be with our spiritual family? Imagine what the Kingdom of God will look like when we finally see its fullness established in the earth. It will be a world filled with the love of Christ, where all God's children reflect His perfect love and glory.

So, back to our question, who is a Jew? My son and I had a chance to recently visit the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. I was trying to get him registered as an Israeli citizen so he could get his passport. They grilled us extensively about our Jewish heritage, attempting to confirm whether we were Jewish or not. Several trips to the consulate, along with a plethora of paperwork, including birth certificates, a letter from a doctor, and our marriage license, they finally issued his passport. We were frustrated, but the embassy confirmed we were true Jews. Or did they?

Rabbinic Law (Jewish tradition) stipulates that a child of a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of the father's lineage, while the child of a non-Jewish mother is not Jewish. But where is this in the Bible? It is not. The rabbinic position in the Talmud (Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai) is exacted and interpreted from two places in scripture, the Book of Ezra and Deuteronomy Chapter 7, the primary emphasis being on the influence a mother has over the child's spiritual upbringing.^{xv} There is no dissident rabbinic opinion, which is unusual for the sages. However, recent studies suggest that fathers have equal, and in some areas, greater influence over a child's personality and character development.

Paul said, "*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God*" (Romans 2:28-29). Our Jewish identity is not derived from our natural ancestry as much as it is defined by our spiritual heritage, which is in Christ. Therefore, our shared identity is in the Spirit, not in our flesh. Our citizenship in the Kingdom is with our brothers and sisters who have been circumcised in the heart by the Spirit of adoption.

The fact that Christianity is rooted in biblical Judaism does not make or require the Gentiles to become Jewish, nor does it presume they replace the natural descendants of Abraham as God's firstborn nation.

However, it does mean that the Gentiles would be equally sharing and desiring of the things that are important to God.^{xvi} These include His holy convocations, the Passover and communion, the Sabbath, healing the sick, caring for the widows and orphans, feeding the poor, sharing the gospel to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all people, and most significantly praying for the peace of Jerusalem, the salvation of the Jewish people, and the restoration of the Kingdom of God.

Amen!

ⁱ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Bible (NKJV) unless otherwise noted, Thomas Nelson Inc., 1982.

ⁱⁱ Ancient Israel. TimeMaps.com (Note: There are differing opinions, so these are referenced to illustrate the overall timeline rather than to depict exact dates).

ⁱⁱⁱ The prophet Jeremiah wrote his oracles during the forty-years leading up to the destruction and captivity of the Judeans, and the prophet Daniel wrote his oracles during the Judeans time of captivity in Babylon.

^{iv} Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin (which for a time was part of the kingdom of Judah), and since he was not from the tribe of Judah itself, only referred to himself as either a Hebrew or Israelite.

^v Acts 2:10, 13:43.

^{vi} Rabbinic Judaism or Rabbinism has been the mainstream form of Judaism since the 6th century A.D., after the codification of the Babylonian Talmud. Wikipedia.

^{vii} Romans 11:29.

^{viii} Freeman, Tzvi. *Who is a Jew?* Chabad.org.

^{ix} The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven are referenced more than one-hundred times in the New Testament.

^x Psalm 87:5, Isaiah 66:8.

^{xi} Romans 9:3-4.

^{xii} Amos 9:12, Romans 9:15, Acts 15:17.

^{xiii} Oxford Dictionary.

^{xiv} Revelation 5:9, 7:9.

^{xv} Freeman, Tzvi. *Why is Jewishness Matrilineal?* Chabad.org.

^{xvi} Ephesians 3:6.