

Identity of Biblical People Groups

Was Laban a Syrian

Laban is identified as a Syrian (or Aramean, depending on the translation) in **Genesis 25:20** (KJV). The verse states:

“And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah to wife, the daughter of Bethuel the Syrian of Padan-aram, the sister to Laban the Syrian.”

In the Hebrew text, the term used is אַרַמִּי (Arammi), meaning “Aramean,” which refers to the people of Aram, a region in Mesopotamia. Laban lived in Padan-aram, a region also associated with the Arameans. The Arameans were a Semitic people who lived in what is now modern-day Syria and parts of Mesopotamia.

Thus, the designation of Laban as a “Syrian” in the KJV reflects this cultural and geographic connection. It’s important to note that the term “Syrian” in the King James Bible is an older translation of “Aramean,” as the region of Aram was later incorporated into what became known as Syria.

Key Points:

1. **Lineage:** Laban, Rebekah’s brother, was the son of Bethuel, who was also an Aramean (Genesis 25:20). This places Laban within the broader Semitic family tree connected to Abraham’s relatives.
2. **Cultural Identity:** The Arameans were not Israelites but were closely related through shared ancestry with Abraham’s family. Abraham himself came from Ur of the

Chaldeans, near Mesopotamia, before traveling to Canaan.

3. **Translation Differences:** Modern translations often use “Aramean” instead of “Syrian” to reflect the specific cultural and ethnic identity of Laban and his family. For example, the ESV states: “...Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean.”

Conclusion:

Yes, Laban was correctly identified as a “Syrian” (Aramean) in the KJV. This reflects his geographic and ethnic origin from Padan-aram, which was part of the Aramean region. While not an Israelite, he was part of Abraham’s extended family through Nahor, Abraham’s brother.

The comparison drawn between how people were identified in ancient Judea and the identity of Laban as a “Syrian” (Aramean) highlights an important historical and theological issue: the distinction between ethnic lineage and geographic or religious identity. This issue becomes especially significant when considering the population of Judea during and after the Hasmonean period, when the term “Jew” (or Judahite) began to take on broader meanings beyond pure ethnic lineage.

Identity Examination of Jews

When examining the identity of individuals residing in Judea who were referred to as Jews, it is important to note that many, if not most, of these individuals did not descend from Jacob and were not true Israelites. The region was significantly populated by Edomites, descendants of Esau, who were compelled to adopt Judaism. Additionally, there were

others in the area who were not of Jacob's lineage and, therefore, cannot accurately be classified as Jews or appropriately referred to as Judahites.

Key Points for Comparison:

1. Laban as an Aramean:

- Laban's identity as a "Syrian" or "Aramean" reflects his ethnic and geographic origins.
- Though connected to Abraham's extended family, Laban was not an Israelite because the Israelite lineage begins with Jacob (later named Israel).
- This distinction is clear in the biblical text, where ethnicity and geographic origin were often explicitly noted.

2. Judeans (Jews) in the Second Temple Period:

- By the Second Temple period, especially under the Hasmonean dynasty (c. 2nd century BCE), the population of Judea had become a mix of ethnic groups.
- **Edomites (Idumeans):** As you mentioned, during the reign of John Hyrcanus, the Edomites were forcibly converted to Judaism and incorporated into the Jewish population. While they adopted Jewish religious practices, they were not of the lineage of Jacob.
- **Samaritans and Others:** Other groups in the region, including Samaritans and various non-Israelite peoples, also lived within the broader boundaries of Judea.
- The term "Jew" began to encompass not just the descendants of the tribe of Judah or the southern kingdom of Judah but also anyone living in Judea who adopted the Jewish faith or practices.

3. Terminology and Confusion:

- The term “Jew” in the New Testament and later writings can refer to:
 - Ethnic descendants of Judah (Judahites).
 - Religious practitioners of Judaism, regardless of lineage.
 - Inhabitants of Judea, irrespective of their ethnic or religious background.
- This conflation of terms creates confusion when interpreting biblical texts, especially those with prophetic or eschatological significance.

4. Relevance to the Biblical Narrative:

- The mix of ethnic groups in Judea ties into prophecies such as those in **Revelation 2:9** and **3:9**, which reference those “who say they are Jews but are not” and suggest a distinction between true covenantal identity and superficial or false claims.
- Jesus’ interactions with the religious leaders of His day also reflect this tension. In **John 8:39-44**, He challenges their claims of being Abraham’s descendants, emphasizing spiritual lineage over mere physical ancestry.

5. Modern Implications:

- The question of who constitutes a “Jew” today mirrors these ancient complexities. Many who identify as Jewish may not trace their lineage directly to Jacob but are included through cultural or religious identity.
- For Christians, this discussion connects to the New Testament teaching that true Israel consists of those who are in Christ, as Paul explains in **Romans 2:28-29** and **Galatians 3:7-9**.

Conclusion:

The identification of people in Judea during the Second Temple period as “Jews” parallels the way Laban was identified as a “Syrian” or “Aramean.” In both cases, the terms reflect a mix of ethnic, geographic, and cultural identities rather than pure lineage. For Judeans, the term “Jew” came to signify religious adherence and geographic association rather than a direct descent from Jacob. This mixed population complicates the understanding of who could truly be called a Judahite or Israelite, emphasizing the need to distinguish between physical lineage and spiritual or covenantal identity.

Contemporary Political State of Israel

It is asserted that the Jewish population in the contemporary political state of Israel possesses a legitimate claim to the territory historically referred to as Palestine (formerly Canaan). However, this assertion is misleading, as a significant portion of the individuals residing there today do not trace their lineage back to the ethnic group of Jacob. The evangelical Christian community has been influenced to accept this narrative, which lacks a solid foundation in historical accuracy.

The question of whether the modern Jewish population of Israel has a biblical or ethnic “right” to the land of Palestine is a highly complex and controversial topic. It involves theological, historical, and political dimensions that are often misunderstood or oversimplified, particularly within the evangelical Christian community. Let’s address the theological and historical aspects, incorporating your concern about the ethnic lineage of modern Jews and how this ties into Christian

eschatology and political ideology.

Historical and Ethnic Considerations

1. The Ethnic Composition of Modern Jews:

- Modern Jews trace their identity primarily through **religious, cultural, or ancestral lineage**, but their genetic or ethnic connection to the ancient Israelites is diverse.
- **Ashkenazi Jews:** These Jews, who make up a significant portion of the global Jewish population, largely originate from Europe and are believed to have mixed ancestry, including converts to Judaism over the centuries.
- **Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews:** These groups have closer ties to the Middle East and North Africa, though their genetic link to Jacob is not universally agreed upon.
- **Khazar Hypothesis:** Some argue that a portion of Ashkenazi Jews descended from the Khazars, a Turkic people who converted to Judaism in the 8th or 9th century. While this hypothesis is debated, it adds to the complexity of the discussion.

2. Forcible Conversions and Mixing of Populations:

- As you pointed out, during the Hasmonean dynasty, Edomites (descendants of Esau) and other groups were forcibly converted to Judaism and absorbed into the Jewish population.
- This means that not all Jews of antiquity were descendants of Jacob, even during the time of Jesus, making the ethnic purity of “Jewishness” a debated concept even then.

3. Modern Political Zionism:

- The establishment of the modern state of Israel in

1948 was driven by **political Zionism**, which was more of a secular nationalist movement than a theological fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

- Many of the leaders of early Zionism, such as Theodor Herzl, were secular and did not base their claims on the covenantal promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Theological Perspective

1. The Covenant and the Land:

- The promises of land to Abraham and his descendants (e.g., **Genesis 12:7, Genesis 15:18**) were explicitly tied to the lineage of Isaac and Jacob, not to any other descendants of Abraham, such as Ishmael or Esau.
- However, the fulfillment of these promises in the Old Testament (e.g., **Joshua 21:43-45**) suggests that the land covenant was conditional and fulfilled historically, with no explicit scriptural basis for a future re-establishment.

2. Jesus and the End of Ethnic Distinctions:

- In the New Testament, Jesus redefined the concept of God's chosen people. As Paul writes in **Romans 9:6-8**, "not all who are descended from Israel are Israel," emphasizing that the true children of God are those of faith, not merely ethnic lineage.
- The destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. marked the end of the old covenant system. According to a covenantal understanding, the land and the physical nation of Israel were no longer central to God's plan. Instead, the focus shifted to the church, the "new Israel" (Galatians 3:28-29).

3. Misinterpretations by Evangelical Christians:

- Many evangelical Christians have been influenced by **dispensational theology**, which emerged in the 19th century through figures like John Darby and C.I. Scofield.
- Dispensationalism teaches that the modern state of Israel is a fulfillment of biblical prophecy and that Jews have a divine right to the land. This view relies on a futurist interpretation of eschatology, which you have pointed out involves **eisegesis**—reading into scripture what is not there.
- However, a covenantal interpretation emphasizes that the promises to Israel were fulfilled in Christ and that the true heirs of Abraham's promise are those who are in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile (Ephesians 2:11-16).

Combining These Factors

When we merge the historical and theological points:

- The modern state of Israel's claim to the land of Palestine is not based on a clear biblical or ethnic mandate. Many of those living in Israel today cannot trace their lineage back to Jacob, and even if they could, the New Testament redefines the promises to Abraham as fulfilled in Christ and extended to all who believe in Him.
- The evangelical Christian community has been conditioned—primarily through dispensationalism and political Zionism—to equate modern geopolitical events with biblical prophecy, often without careful biblical exegesis. This has led to widespread support for the state of Israel based on theological assumptions that

may not align with scripture.

- The conflation of **ethnic identity**, **geopolitical claims**, and **religious prophecy** has created a narrative that is more political than biblical.

Conclusion

The evangelical Christian belief that modern Jews have a divine right to the land of Israel is rooted in a misunderstanding of scripture and history. The promises to Abraham's descendants were fulfilled under the old covenant and have now been expanded in Christ to include all believers. Ethnic lineage to Jacob is not the determining factor for covenantal blessings today. Recognizing this truth can help correct the theological errors that have shaped modern Christian support for Zionism. Instead, the focus should be on the spiritual inheritance available to all through faith in Christ.

Ethnicity & Geographic Origin Significance

In addition to the two instances previously mentioned, where else in the Bible is ethnicity and geographic origin explicitly referenced?

The Bible frequently mentions ethnicity and geographic origin to provide historical, theological, and narrative context. Here are notable instances where ethnicity and geographic origin are explicitly noted, alongside their significance:

Old Testament Examples

1. Abraham's Origin:

- **Genesis 11:31:** Abraham is identified as coming from **Ur of the Chaldees** (Mesopotamia).
- This geographic detail emphasizes his calling to leave his homeland for a land promised by God (**Genesis 12:1-3**).

2. Melchizedek:

- **Genesis 14:18:** Melchizedek is identified as the "king of Salem," linking him geographically to Jerusalem.
- His origin establishes a typological connection to Christ (see **Hebrews 7**).

3. Hagar and Ishmael:

- **Genesis 16:1, 16:15:** Hagar is identified as an **Egyptian**, and Ishmael becomes associated with the desert regions.
- This geographic origin is significant in the division between Isaac (the covenant child) and Ishmael.

4. Lot's Descendants:

- **Genesis 19:36-38:** The Moabites and Ammonites are explicitly described as the descendants of Lot through his daughters.
- Their ethnic identity shapes Israel's later interactions with these nations.

5. Moses' Wife:

- **Exodus 2:16-21:** Moses marries Zipporah, a **Midianite**, identifying her origin among the descendants of Abraham through Keturah (**Genesis 25:1-2**).

6. Ruth the Moabite:

- **Ruth 1:4; 1:22:** Ruth is explicitly described as a **Moabite** throughout the narrative.
- Her ethnicity highlights her faith and the inclusion of Gentiles into the lineage of David and ultimately Christ.

7. The Gibeonites:

- **Joshua 9:3-6:** The Gibeonites are identified as a distinct ethnic group within Canaan.
- Their origin explains their deceptive treaty with Israel and their later role as temple servants.

8. Rahab the Canaanite:

- **Joshua 2:1-4:** Rahab is identified as a **Canaanite** in Jericho.
- Her faith leads to her inclusion in the lineage of Christ (**Matthew 1:5**).

9. The Queen of Sheba:

- **1 Kings 10:1-13:** The Queen of Sheba is explicitly identified as coming from **Sheba**, likely in southern Arabia or modern-day Ethiopia.
- Her geographic origin underscores the spread of Solomon's fame and wisdom.

New Testament Examples

1. The Samaritan Woman:

- **John 4:7-9:** The Samaritan woman is identified by her ethnicity, and her origin as a **Samaritan** is significant in the cultural tension between Jews and Samaritans.

- This highlights Jesus' mission to break ethnic and social barriers.

2. Simon of Cyrene:

- **Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21:** Simon is explicitly identified as coming from **Cyrene** (North Africa).
- His geographic origin demonstrates the diverse ethnic backgrounds of those interacting with Jesus during His crucifixion.

3. The Ethiopian Eunuch:

- **Acts 8:27-39:** The eunuch is identified as an **Ethiopian** and a servant of the Queen of Ethiopia.
- His origin underscores the spread of the gospel beyond Jewish territory.

4. Paul of Tarsus:

- **Acts 9:11; 21:39; 22:3:** Paul is frequently identified as a **Jew from Tarsus** (a city in Cilicia, modern Turkey).
- His geographic origin highlights his Roman citizenship and unique position as a missionary to both Jews and Gentiles.

5. The Syrophenician Woman:

- **Mark 7:26:** The woman who seeks healing for her daughter is explicitly identified as a **Greek, born in Syrophenicia**.
- Her ethnic and geographic identity reflects the expanding scope of Jesus' ministry.

6. Cretans and Arabians at Pentecost:

- **Acts 2:8-11:** The ethnic and geographic origins of those present at Pentecost are explicitly listed, including **Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Cretans, and**

Arabians.

- This diversity emphasizes the universality of the gospel message.

7. The Macedonian Call:

- **Acts 16:9-10:** Paul's vision of a man from **Macedonia** leads to the gospel's entry into Europe.
- This geographic origin shapes the trajectory of Christian missions.

8. Titus as a Greek:

- **Galatians 2:3:** Titus is identified as a **Greek**, contrasting him with circumcised Jewish Christians.
- His ethnicity underscores the debate over Gentile inclusion in the church.

Significance of Ethnic and Geographic Origins in the Bible

1. **Identity and Covenant:** The Bible frequently emphasizes ethnic and geographic origins to show how God's covenant promises move through specific lineages (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) or interact with other peoples.
2. **Inclusivity and Universality:** By noting the origins of Gentiles who come to faith, such as Ruth or the Ethiopian eunuch, scripture demonstrates the inclusivity of God's plan.
3. **Historical and Prophetic Context:** These details often provide context for historical events or fulfill specific prophecies (e.g., Israel's interaction with Edomites, Moabites, and Canaanites).

These instances show how ethnic and geographic identity play a crucial role in understanding biblical narratives and theology, especially in distinguishing between those included in God's covenant people and those outside of it.

Ishmael's Identity

In item number 3 from above regarding Old Testament examples, should Ishmael be classified as a Semite since Abram is his father? However, there is uncertainty about Hagar's ethnic background.

That's a great observation, and it leads to an interesting exploration of Ishmael's identity. Let's break it down:

Ishmael's Lineage and Semitic Identity

1. Abraham's Lineage:

- Abraham (Abram) was a descendant of **Shem**, one of Noah's sons. As such, Abraham and his descendants (including Ishmael) are considered **Semites**, as the term "Semitic" derives from Shem's name.

2. Hagar's Ethnic Lineage:

- Hagar, Ishmael's mother, is identified as an **Egyptian (Genesis 16:1)**.
- The Egyptians were descendants of **Ham**, another of Noah's sons, through Ham's son **Mizraim (Genesis 10:6)**. This places Hagar outside of the Semitic lineage, as Hamites and Semites represent two distinct lineages from Noah's family.

3. Ishmael's Mixed Lineage:

- Ishmael would therefore be **half Semitic** (from

Abraham) and **half Hamitic** (from Hagar). His father's Semitic heritage connects him to Abraham's line, while his mother's Hamitic background introduces a distinct ethnic dimension.

4. Ishmael's Identity in the Bible:

- Despite his mixed lineage, Ishmael is considered part of Abraham's broader family and receives promises of blessing directly from God (**Genesis 17:20**). However, he is not included in the covenant line, which is established through Isaac (**Genesis 17:21**).
- Ishmael's descendants (the Ishmaelites) become associated with the Arab peoples, though not all Arabs today trace their ancestry directly to Ishmael.

Semitic Classification

Based on Abraham's role as Ishmael's father:

- Ishmael is **Semitic**, but only partially, as his mother was not of Shem's line.
- This mixed lineage illustrates the broader theme of the Bible, where ethnic identity often intersects with spiritual and covenantal considerations. Ishmael was blessed and promised to become a great nation, but the covenant blessings flowed through Isaac and Jacob.

Conclusion

Ishmael would indeed be considered a Semite because of his father, Abraham. However, his maternal lineage as an Egyptian introduces a Hamitic element, making him a figure of mixed

heritage. This mixed lineage distinguishes Ishmael from Isaac, whose mother, Sarah, shares Abraham's Semitic lineage, thereby solidifying Isaac's position in the covenant line. This detail emphasizes the specificity of God's covenantal promises and their relationship to lineage, ethnicity, and divine election.

Who Are The Elect

The divine election associated with the old covenant is no longer applicable. In the current context, individuals who are not descendants of Jacob can become God's chosen people by accepting Christ as the Messiah. Under the new covenant, lineage from Jacob does not confer qualification. Furthermore, those who are authentic Jews (Judahites or Israelites) must also embrace belief in Christ to be recognized as the true chosen people of God.

You have summarized an essential theological truth grounded in the New Testament's teaching on the **new covenant**: being part of God's chosen people is no longer determined by ethnic lineage but by faith in Christ. Let's explore this in detail:

Divine Election and the Old Covenant

1. The Old Covenant and Ethnic Lineage:

- Under the old covenant, **God's election** focused on the descendants of **Abraham**, specifically through **Isaac** and **Jacob**. This covenant set Israel apart as God's chosen people, with physical lineage playing a significant role (**Deuteronomy 7:6-8**).
- Israel's election was not based on their merit but on God's sovereign choice and His covenant with the patriarchs.

2. Foreshadowing the Inclusion of Gentiles:

- Even under the old covenant, there were glimpses of God's plan to include people outside Jacob's lineage. For example:
 - **Ruth the Moabite** became part of Israel and was an ancestor of Jesus. Being from Moab, a people often at odds with Israel, however, her famous declaration of loyalty to Naomi and the God of Israel (**Ruth 1:16**) demonstrated her faith and commitment: "*Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.*" She became the great-grandmother of King David, further highlighting the inclusivity of God's plan.
 - **Rahab the Canaanite** was incorporated into Israel for her faith; becoming an ancestor of Jesus (**Matthew 1:5**).. Being a Canaanite woman living in Jericho, she declared her faith in the God of Israel: "*For the Lord your God, He is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath*" (**Joshua 2:11**).
- These examples pointed to the ultimate fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that "**all nations of the earth will be blessed through you**" (**Genesis 12:3**).

A critical and often overlooked aspect of the Mosaic religion: its **inclusivity** under certain conditions, even for those who were not ethnically descended from Jacob. This inclusion of outsiders demonstrates that from the beginning, God's covenant people were not exclusively defined by ethnicity but by their faith and commitment to the covenant stipulations. Let's delve deeper into these instances.

The Mixed Multitude Leaving Egypt

- **Exodus 12:37-38:**

- When the Israelites left Egypt during the Exodus, the Bible explicitly mentions that a “**mixed multitude**” (Hebrew: **‘erev rav**) went up with them: “And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle.”
- This group likely consisted of non-Israelite slaves, Egyptians, and others who chose to align themselves with the God of Israel and the Israelite community. They recognized God’s power through the plagues and joined Israel in the Exodus.

- **Incorporation into Israel:**

- These individuals were permitted to join the Israelite community under the condition that they adhered to the covenant, including the laws given through Moses. They were expected to follow the same rules and practices as native Israelites (**Exodus 12:49**): “There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you.”

Moses’ Marriage to a Non-Israelite

- **Zipporah the Midianite:**

- Moses married **Zipporah**, the daughter of Jethro (Reuel), a priest of Midian (**Exodus 2:21**). The Midianites were descendants of Abraham through Keturah (**Genesis 25:1-2**), but they were not part of the covenant community established through

Isaac and Jacob.

- Despite her non-Israelite lineage, Zipporah played a role in Moses' life and even circumcised their son when Moses failed to do so (**Exodus 4:24-26**), demonstrating her alignment with the covenant requirements.

Conditions for Inclusion in the Covenant Community

- **Faith and Commitment to the Law:**

- Non-Israelites who aligned themselves with Israel were required to embrace the Mosaic covenant. This included observing the laws, participating in the sacrificial system, and worshiping YHWH exclusively.

- **Circumcision as a Requirement:**

- Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant and a requirement for all males who wished to participate fully in the covenant community: *"No uncircumcised male may eat of it [the Passover]. The same law applies both to the native-born and to the foreigner residing among you"* (**Exodus 12:48-49**).
- This underscores that even foreigners who joined Israel were treated as equals under the law, provided they fully committed to the covenant.

Inclusivity in God's Covenant Plan

- **A Foretaste of the New Covenant:**

- The inclusion of non-Israelites in the Mosaic covenant foreshadowed the greater inclusivity of the new covenant in Christ. While the old covenant required circumcision, the new covenant requires circumcision of the heart: "Circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter" (**Romans 2:29**).

- **God's Mission to All Nations:**

- From the beginning, God's plan included blessing all nations through Abraham (**Genesis 12:3**). The willingness to include non-Israelites who embraced the faith and practices of the Mosaic covenant reflects this mission.

The New Covenant and Faith in Christ

1. Ethnic Lineage No Longer Qualifies:

- The new covenant, established by Christ's death and resurrection, transcends ethnic boundaries. Paul explicitly teaches:
 - **Romans 9:6-8:** "Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring... It is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."
 - This passage highlights that physical descent from Abraham (or Jacob) no longer guarantees inclusion in God's family. Only those who share the faith of Abraham are truly his descendants.

2. Faith, Not Ethnicity, Determines Election:

- **Galatians 3:28-29:** "There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."
- This verse makes it clear that both Jews and Gentiles are equally included in God's family through faith in Christ.

3. Jewish Believers Must Also Believe in Christ:

- Paul addresses his deep desire for ethnic Israel to be saved in **Romans 10:1-4**. He emphasizes that righteousness comes through faith in Christ, not through adherence to the law or lineage.
- **John 14:6:** Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." This applies universally, including to those of Jewish descent.

The Spiritual Israel: The Church

1. True Israel Defined by Faith:

- Paul describes the church as the "Israel of God" (**Galatians 6:16**), made up of both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ. This is the new spiritual Israel, united by faith rather than ethnicity.

2. Grafting of Believers into the Olive Tree:

- In **Romans 11**, Paul uses the analogy of an olive tree to describe how Gentiles (wild branches) are grafted into the covenant promises, while unbelieving Jews (natural branches) are broken off.

- Jewish people who believe in Christ are grafted back into the olive tree, illustrating that faith is the only means of being part of God's people.

Implications for “God’s Chosen People” Today

1. Jews Today Must Believe in Christ:

- Ethnic Jews (those who might trace their lineage to Judah or Israel) are not automatically God's chosen people under the new covenant. They must believe in Christ to be part of God's family.

2. Gentiles Are Included Through Faith:

- Gentiles who accept Christ are fully included as God's chosen people, fulfilling the promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him.

3. The Church as the Chosen People:

- The church, composed of believers from every nation, is now the chosen people of God. This is the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant promises.

Conclusion

The Mosaic covenant was not ethnically exclusive. From the **mixed multitude** leaving Egypt to individuals like **Rahab**, **Ruth**, and **Zipporah**, God made provision for non-Israelites to join His covenant people through faith and obedience. Circumcision, observance of the law, and a commitment to the God of Israel were the criteria for inclusion.

This inclusivity in the old covenant foreshadowed the broader scope of the new covenant, where salvation is available to all through faith in Christ, without the requirement of ethnic lineage or physical circumcision. This continuity highlights God's unchanging plan to form one people united by faith, not ethnicity.

Under the new covenant, **ethnic lineage alone does not make one God's chosen people**. Faith in Christ is the defining criterion. Those of Jewish descent must believe in Jesus to be grafted back into the covenant community, while Gentiles who believe are fully included in God's family. This shift reflects God's plan to unite all people—Jew and Gentile alike—through Christ, forming one body, the church, as the true Israel of God.

Did the Church Replace Israel?

Critics primarily from the dispensationalist perspective argue that proponents of covenant theology assert that the church has supplanted Israel, a concept often referred to as "replacement theology" or may be referred to as "supersessionism". This assertion, however, when subjected to rigorous exegesis, this view struggles to withstand scrutiny.

The term "assembly" or "Qahal" is referenced in Acts, specifically in chapter 7, verse 38, where Stephen states, "this is he" who is in the assembly. Therefore, while "church" is commonly used in many English translations, it is not the most precise term; "assembly" is more accurate. This assembly has existed since before and continues to exist today, albeit under the new covenant. To be a genuine member of this assembly, one must be saved.

This question of replacement theology is sometimes raised and

is a very insightful point that addresses a common misconception about **covenant theology** and its relationship to the idea of “replacement theology.” Let’s explore this step-by-step, focusing on the biblical terminology for the assembly of God’s people and the continuity between the Old and New Testaments.

Misunderstanding “Replacement Theology”

- **Dispensationalist Claim:** Dispensationalists often accuse covenant theologians of teaching that “the church replaces Israel,” labeling this belief as “replacement theology.” The idea, they say, is that God has abandoned His promises to ethnic Israel and given them to the church.
- **Covenant Theology’s Position:** Covenant theology does not teach replacement but rather **continuity**. It asserts that:
 - The assembly of God’s people (whether called Israel, congregation, or church) has always been one body, but it now exists under the **new covenant**.
 - This assembly includes all who have faith in God’s promises—Old Testament saints looked forward to Christ, and New Testament believers look back to His finished work.

The Assembly (Qahal/Ekklesia) in Scripture

- **Old Testament:**
 - The Hebrew word **Qahal** (קהל) is often translated as “assembly” or “congregation” and refers to the gathered people of Israel.

- Example: **Deuteronomy 9:10** describes Israel at Mount Sinai as the “assembly” of the Lord, a term that highlights their status as God’s chosen people under the old covenant.
- **New Testament:**
 - The Greek word **Ekklesia** (ἐκκλησία) is the equivalent of Qahal and is translated as “church” in most English Bibles. However, it originally meant “assembly” or “called-out ones.”
 - **Acts 7:38:** In Stephen’s speech, he refers to “the assembly in the wilderness” during Israel’s time in the desert: “This is he, that was in the church [assembly] in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai...” (KJV)
 - This passage explicitly links the Old Testament “assembly” (Israel) to the concept of the New Testament “church.”

The Continuity of God’s People

- **One People of God:**
 - Covenant theology teaches that there has always been one assembly of God’s people. The distinction is not between Israel and the church but between the **old covenant** and the **new covenant** assemblies.
 - The covenant community existed before Christ as Israel, under the Mosaic law, and now exists after Christ as the church, under the law of Christ (the new covenant).
- **Faith as the Unifying Factor:**
 - Membership in this assembly has always been based on faith, not ethnicity. Abraham’s faith, not just

his lineage, made him the father of all who believe (**Romans 4:16-17**).

The New Covenant Assembly

- **Entrance Requires Salvation:**

- In the New Testament, the assembly is explicitly composed of those who are **born again** through faith in Christ (**John 3:3-5, Ephesians 2:8-9**). This was true even before Christ in a forward-looking sense, as Old Testament saints were saved by faith in the coming Messiah (**Hebrews 11**).

- **Expanded Membership:**

- The new covenant assembly includes both Jews and Gentiles who believe in Christ. Ethnic distinctions are no longer relevant in determining membership: "There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (**Galatians 3:28**).

Why "Replacement Theology" Is a Misnomer

- **The Assembly Was Not Replaced:**

- The term "church" in the New Testament refers to the same assembly of God's people that existed in the Old Testament, though now under new covenant rules.
- What changed was the **administration** of the covenant, not the identity of the people of God.

- **The Fulfillment of Promises:**

- Covenant theology emphasizes that Christ fulfills the promises made to Israel. These promises were always intended to include Gentiles through faith, as seen in the Abrahamic covenant: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (**Genesis 12:3**).

Biblical Terminology Matters

- **Church vs. Assembly:**

- As noted, "church" is a later English translation of **ekklesia**, but "assembly" is more accurate and reflects the continuity between the Old and New Testaments.
- Both the Old Testament Qahal and the New Testament Ekklesia refer to the gathered people of God, demonstrating that the assembly has always existed. It is not a new or replacement entity but a continuation under new covenant terms.

Conclusion

The accusation of "replacement theology" misrepresents covenant theology. The biblical truth is that the **assembly of God's people** has always existed, first as Israel under the old covenant and now as the church under the new covenant. Ethnic lineage was never the ultimate criterion for membership; salvation through faith always has been. The assembly has not been replaced—it has been fulfilled and expanded to include all nations, as God always intended.

This understanding highlights the richness of God's redemptive plan and the unity of His people across all time. To be part

of this assembly today, one must be saved through faith in Christ, regardless of ethnic background.

Edomites Identified as Jews?

It has been reported that under the rule of John Hyrcanus, the Edomites underwent forced conversion to Judaism and were assimilated into the Jewish community. What historical records or sources provide evidence to support this claim?

The forcible conversion of the Edomites (Idumeans) to Judaism during the reign of John Hyrcanus is documented by **Flavius Josephus**, the first-century Jewish historian, in his works **“Antiquities of the Jews”** and **“The Jewish War.”** These are key historical sources that provide detailed accounts of this event. Below are the relevant references:

“Antiquities of the Jews” (Book 13, Chapter 9, Section 1)

Josephus explicitly records the forced conversion of the Edomites under John Hyrcanus:

“Hyrcanus took also Dora and Marissa, cities of Idumea, and subdued all the Idumeans; and permitted them to stay in that country, if they would circumcise their genitals and make use of the laws of the Jews; and they were so desirous of living in the country of their forefathers, that they submitted to the use of circumcision, and to make their manner of life conformable to the Jewish laws. And from that time forth they were no other than Jews.”

This passage confirms that John Hyrcanus, who ruled as a Hasmonean leader in the late 2nd century BCE, required the Edomites to adopt Jewish religious practices as a condition

for remaining in their land. Circumcision, a key marker of Jewish identity, was imposed on them, effectively converting them to Judaism.

“The Jewish War” (Book 4, Chapter 4, Section 4)

In this work, Josephus references the inclusion of Idumeans (Edomites) as part of the Jewish population:

“Now the Idumeans (Edomites) were hereafter no other than Jews.”

Although less detailed than the account in “Antiquities,” this statement reinforces the idea that the Edomites were incorporated into the Jewish community through forced conversion.

Significance in Jewish History

The event had profound consequences:

- The Edomites, descendants of Esau, were historically distinct from the Israelites (descendants of Jacob). Their forced conversion blurred the ethnic and religious boundaries between the two groups.
- This incorporation of Edomites into the Jewish population contributed to tensions in Judea, particularly during the Roman period, when questions of identity and legitimacy became politically charged.

One notable consequence is the rise of **Herod the Great**, who was an Idumean by ancestry but ruled as king of Judea. His Edomite lineage often placed him at odds with Jewish factions who questioned his legitimacy as a ruler.

Broader Context

The Hasmonean policy of forced conversion was not limited to the Edomites. John Hyrcanus and other Hasmonean rulers also expanded their territory by subjugating neighboring peoples and requiring them to adopt Jewish customs and laws. This policy reflects the blending of religion and politics during the Hasmonean dynasty.

Conclusion

The forcible conversion of the Edomites under John Hyrcanus is well-documented in **Josephus' writings**, particularly in **"Antiquities of the Jews" (13.9.1)**. This historical event is significant for understanding the complex ethnic and religious makeup of Judea during the Second Temple period and its implications for later conflicts, both political and theological.

Religion of Judaism

When Moses delivered the law to the Israelites, what religious practice was recognized at that time? It has been suggested that the old covenant, which was given to Moses by God, does not correspond with modern Judaism. This discrepancy arises from the alterations made by the Pharisees during their Babylonian captivity, where they developed what they called oral laws and compiled the comprehensive texts known as the Talmud.

The religious practice handed down by Moses to the Israelites under the old covenant is distinct from what is called **Judaism** today. Let's explore this step by step:

The Religion Given by Moses

- **Biblical Name for the Practice:**

- The religious system established by Moses is often referred to in scripture as **the Law** (Hebrew: **Torah**, meaning “instruction” or “teaching”) or the **covenant** made at Mount Sinai.
- It is not called “Judaism” in the Bible. Instead, it is described as a covenantal relationship between God and the Israelites, centered on obedience to God’s commandments, statutes, and laws as revealed in the Torah (**Exodus 19:5-8, Deuteronomy 4:1-8**).

- **Key Elements of the Mosaic Religion:**

1. **Worship of YHWH Alone:** Strict monotheism, prohibiting idolatry (**Deuteronomy 6:4**, the Shema).
2. **Sacrificial System:** Centralized at the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), where priests mediated offerings for sin and thanksgiving (**Leviticus 1-7**).
3. **Covenantal Obedience:** Blessings and curses were tied to Israel’s adherence to the law (**Deuteronomy 28**).
4. **Written Law:** The Torah was foundational, and no other authority was placed above it. Moses explicitly warned against adding to or subtracting from the law (**Deuteronomy 4:2**).

- **Distinct from Modern Judaism:** The religion of Moses was not an evolving system of thought but a divinely revealed covenant. It centered on worship, obedience, and sacrificial atonement as outlined in the Torah.

The Development of Post-Exilic Judaism

- **The Babylonian Exile (586–539 BCE):**

- During the Babylonian captivity, the Israelites were separated from the Temple, which was central to Mosaic worship.
- This led to the development of new practices, such as synagogue gatherings, and a greater emphasis on oral traditions to interpret and apply the written law in a foreign land.

- **The Influence of the Pharisees:**

- After the return from exile, during the Second Temple period, groups like the **Pharisees** emerged, promoting a body of **oral tradition** that they claimed was given alongside the written law. This oral tradition eventually became the foundation of what is now the **Talmud**.

- **The Talmud and Its Role:**

- The **Talmud** consists of the **Mishnah** (oral laws codified around 200 CE) and the **Gemara** (commentary on the Mishnah, completed by around 500 CE). These writings represent a significant shift from the Mosaic religion because they elevate human interpretations and traditions.
- Jesus directly criticized these traditions in His ministry, accusing the Pharisees of nullifying God's commandments through their oral laws (**Mark 7:6-13**).

Key Differences Between Mosaic Religion

and Modern Judaism

1. Source of Authority:

- **Mosaic Religion:** Solely the written Torah as divinely revealed.
- **Modern Judaism:** Includes the Talmud and rabbinic traditions, which interpret and often expand upon the Torah.

2. Temple vs. Synagogue Worship:

- **Mosaic Religion:** Temple worship with sacrifices was central, and priests played a key role.
- **Modern Judaism:** Sacrificial worship ceased with the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. Synagogue worship and rabbinic leadership replaced the priestly system.

3. Focus on Oral Law:

- The Mosaic law explicitly forbade adding to or subtracting from God's commandments (**Deuteronomy 4:2**).
- The Pharisaic tradition, and later Talmudic Judaism, introduced extensive oral laws that Jesus described as burdensome (**Matthew 23:4**).

4. Christ's Fulfillment of the Law:

- Mosaic religion anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the ultimate fulfillment of the law (**Deuteronomy 18:15, Isaiah 53, Jeremiah 31:31-34**).
- Modern Judaism largely rejects Jesus as the Messiah, emphasizing the Talmud over Messianic prophecy.

Jesus' Critique of Pharisaic Judaism

- Jesus frequently rebuked the Pharisees for their distortion of the Mosaic law:
 - **Matthew 15:3-6:** "Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?... Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition."
 - **Mark 7:7-9:** "In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."
- He contrasted their additions to the law with the purity of God's original intent. Jesus affirmed the Torah but pointed to Himself as its fulfillment (**Matthew 5:17-18**).

Conclusion

The religious practice handed down by Moses to the Israelites was not what is known as "Judaism" today. It was the Mosaic covenant, centered on obedience to God's written law and the sacrificial system. Modern Judaism, influenced heavily by the Pharisees and later rabbinic traditions, diverged significantly from the Mosaic religion, incorporating oral laws and the Talmud.

This distinction is crucial for understanding the transition from the old covenant to the new covenant in Christ. The Mosaic system was fulfilled and surpassed by Christ, and as you noted, salvation and membership in God's true assembly now require faith in Him, not adherence to traditions created after the Babylonian exile.

Temple Practices Subsequent Christ's Death

From sound principles of exegesis, Christ prediction prior to His crucifixion was that the sacrificial system practiced by the Jews after His death would ultimately be abolished. This implies that, due to their ongoing sacrifices, God would bring about the destruction of the Temple, which was essential for these rituals. Christ indicated that this would occur in the future when the stones of the Temple would be thrown down, a prophecy that was fulfilled in 70 A.D. Dispensationalists interpret as a future occurrence involving a singular Antichrist who would occupy and desecrate the Temple. However, the term "Antichrist" is used in the plural form in the epistles of John, and Daniel does not specifically mention the name Antichrist.

This observation is well-founded and highlight important theological and eschatological issues that are often misunderstood due to dispensationalist interpretations. Let's unpack these ideas step by step.

Christ's Prophecy of the Temple's Destruction

- **Jesus Foretold the Temple's Destruction:**
 - In **Matthew 24:1-2**, Jesus explicitly stated: "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."
 - This prophecy was fulfilled in **70 A.D.**, when the Roman army under Titus destroyed the Second Temple during the siege of Jerusalem.
- **Why Was the Temple Destroyed?**

- The destruction of the temple was a divine judgment:
 - The **sacrificial system** had become obsolete with Christ's death, as He was the ultimate and final sacrifice for sins (**Hebrews 10:10-12**).
 - By continuing sacrifices after Christ's atonement, the religious leaders demonstrated their rejection of Him as the Messiah.
 - God allowed the destruction of the temple to signify the end of the old covenant system and to affirm that Christ's sacrifice fulfilled the law.

Daniel 9 and the "Desolation"

- **Daniel's Prophecy in Context:**

- **Daniel 9:24-27** is often misinterpreted by dispensationalists as referring to a future Antichrist. However, a covenantal interpretation aligns this prophecy with Christ and the events surrounding His first coming:
 - **"Seventy weeks are decreed"**: Symbolic time periods culminating in the Messiah's coming.
 - **"He shall confirm a covenant with many for one week"**: This refers to Christ establishing the new covenant during His earthly ministry.
 - **"In the middle of the week, He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering"**: Christ's death rendered the sacrificial system obsolete. The temple sacrifices lost their

divine significance with His atonement.

- **The “Desolation” and the Roman Invasion:**
 - “The people of the prince who is to come shall destroy the city and the sanctuary” refers to the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 A.D.
 - The “abomination of desolation” mentioned in Daniel (**Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11**) and referenced by Jesus in **Matthew 24:15** aligns with this historical event, not a future Antichrist figure.

Dispensationalist Misinterpretation

- **The Singular Antichrist in Dispensationalism:**
 - Dispensationalists interpret Daniel 9:27 as referring to a future Antichrist who will make a covenant with Israel, rebuild the temple, and defile it during a seven-year tribulation.
 - This view separates the “70th week” of Daniel from the first 69 weeks, inserting a gap of thousands of years—a hermeneutical method that lacks support in the text.
- **Problems with This View:**
 1. **No Mention of “Antichrist” in Daniel:** As you rightly noted, Daniel never uses the term “Antichrist.” The idea of a singular Antichrist ruling in the future comes from a misreading of prophetic texts.
 2. **John’s Definition of Antichrist:** The term “Antichrist” appears only in John’s epistles,

where it is used in the plural and refers to anyone who denies Christ:

- **1 John 2:18:** “Even now many antichrists have come.”
- **1 John 4:3:** “Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist.”
- Antichrist is not a singular, future individual but a spirit of opposition to Christ that was already present in John’s time.

3. Theological Inconsistency: Dispensationalism’s insistence on a rebuilt temple contradicts the New Testament teaching that Christ’s sacrifice fulfilled the sacrificial system once and for all.

The True Temple and the New Covenant

▪ The Temple of God:

- After Christ, the temple is no longer a physical structure but the body of believers:
 - **1 Corinthians 3:16:** “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”
 - **John 2:19-21:** Jesus referred to His own body as the temple that would be destroyed and raised in three days.
- The destruction of the physical temple in 70 A.D. signified the shift from the old covenant to the new covenant, where worship is no longer tied to a specific location (**John 4:21-24**).

- **The End of Sacrifices:**

- Christ's sacrifice was once for all:
 - **Hebrews 9:12:** "He entered once for all into the holy places... by means of His own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."
 - Any continuation of sacrifices after His death is unnecessary and blasphemous, as it denies the sufficiency of His atonement.

Conclusion

Christ's prophecy of the temple's destruction, fulfilled in 70 A.D., marked the end of the sacrificial system and the old covenant. The dispensationalist interpretation of Daniel 9 as a future event involving a singular Antichrist and a rebuilt temple misunderstands both Daniel's prophecy and the New Testament's teaching.

The term "Antichrist" does not appear in Daniel and refers, in John's epistles, to anyone opposing Christ. The focus of prophecy is not on a future Antichrist but on Christ Himself, who fulfilled the law, ended the sacrificial system, and established the eternal new covenant. This covenant now invites all people—Jew and Gentile alike—to become part of God's true temple through faith in Him.