

Reading the New Testament with Historical Clarity

Preface: Understanding Israel, Judah, and the People Called “Jews”

Reader’s Note:

This study is offered in a spirit of care and concern for the church. Its purpose is not to disparage any people or to advance political agendas, but to encourage careful, biblical discernment. The conclusions presented are grounded in Scripture and historical sources, and readers are encouraged to examine them prayerfully and in light of the whole counsel of God.

It is strongly believed if the average evangelical Christian understood the historical and biblical realities surrounding Israel, Judah, and the people later called “**Jews**,” they would read both the Old and New Testaments with greater clarity and discernment. Passages in books such as Obadiah and Ezekiel would no longer seem distant or obscure, but would instead illuminate the religious and historical backdrop of the New Testament. These prophetic writings reveal long-standing patterns of covenant failure, misplaced identity, and spiritual presumption—patterns that did not disappear with the close of the Old Testament, but continued into the time of Christ.

When read in **this light**, the conflicts recorded in the Gospels **are no longer puzzling or abrupt**. Jesus’ confrontations with the Jerusalem leadership emerge as the culmination of issues

already addressed by the prophets. Likewise, the apostles wrote within this same historical framework, consistently redefining identity not by lineage, location, or religious status, but by faith, repentance, and fruit.

What is often overlooked is how modern assumptions about Jewish and Israeli identity influence Christian theology and biblical interpretation. Many believers unintentionally project contemporary definitions backward onto Scripture, assuming continuity where the biblical record emphasizes disruption, judgment, and the need for restoration. Scripture presents a sobering truth: God judged His covenant people not despite their identity, but because they bore His name while failing to walk in His ways.

The period following the Babylonian captivity reinforces this lesson. Though God mercifully allowed a remnant to return to Jerusalem, the problems that led to judgment were not automatically resolved. Over time, religious authority became increasingly entangled with political power, and tradition often replaced obedience. This environment formed the backdrop against which Jesus spoke with such clarity and urgency.

So, the purpose in raising these matters is not to provoke controversy, but to encourage discernment. Scripture consistently measures identity by obedience and fruit, not by ancestry, geography, or profession. If the church fails to learn from this history, it risks repeating the very errors Scripture warns against.

It is my hope that this study will encourage believers to read the whole counsel of God—prophets and apostles alike—within their proper historical and biblical context, so that truth may be discerned clearly and faithfulness preserved.

Introduction: Why Definitions Matter

One of the most persistent sources of confusion in modern Christian theology is the uncritical reading of ancient terms through contemporary assumptions. Few words illustrate this problem more clearly than the word “Jew” in the New Testament. For many readers, the **term automatically implies** a direct, uninterrupted **ethnic lineage** from the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to the modern Jewish people. Yet Scripture itself **never invites** such an assumption.

When modern meanings are imposed upon ancient words, **entire theological systems can be distorted**. The New Testament was written within a specific historical, linguistic, and political context. **Ignoring** that context has led many Christians to misunderstand **who Jesus confronted**, who **opposed Him**, and how identity is defined in the gospel. This article seeks to **restore clarity** by examining the term *Ioudaios*—translated as “Jew”—and demonstrating that it is primarily a **geographical and political designation**, not a guaranteed marker of covenant lineage or spiritual standing. Jesus’ own standard for discernment remains decisive:

“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:20).

This principle governs the entire discussion.

I. The Meaning of “Jew” in Scripture: A Geographic Term

The Greek term *Ioudaios* corresponds to the Hebrew *Yehudi*, meaning a person associated with **Judah** or the **region of Judea**. Its earliest biblical usage reflects this limited scope.

The first appearances of the term occur in:

- **2 Kings 16:6**
- **2 Kings 25:25**

In both cases, *Yehudi* refers to individuals connected to the **southern kingdom of Judah**, not to all Israelites, and certainly **not to a universal ethnic or religious category**.

By the Second Temple period, *Ioudaios* had become a **regional identifier**, similar to how one might say “**Galilean**” or “**Syrian**.” It denoted residency, political allegiance, and cultural association with Judea—**not covenant faithfulness or ancestral purity**.

This distinction is **crucial**, because Judea in the first century was **not ethnically homogeneous**.

II. Judea’s Mixed Population: The Idumean Conversion

Following the Babylonian exile, Judea was repopulated primarily by descendants of **Judah, Benjamin, and Levi**—the remnant of the southern kingdom. However, a dramatic demographic change occurred in the second century BC.

Around **125 BC**, the Hasmonean ruler **John Hyrcanus I** conquered **Idumea** (biblical Edom). According to the Jewish historian **Josephus**, Hyrcanus forcibly converted the Idumeans to Judaism:

“Hyrcanus 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 of the

rest of the Jewish ways of living.”
(*Antiquities 13.9.1*)

From that point forward, Edomites were legally “Jews”—*Ioudaioi*—by **law and geography**, not by descent from Jacob.

This fact alone explains much of the tension in the Gospels. By the time of Christ:

- The **Herodian dynasty** was Edomite by blood.
- The **Sadducean priestly elite** was closely tied to political power.
- Roman favor, not covenant faithfulness, preserved authority.

These were [*Judaeans*](#)¹ in title—but not necessarily Israelites in lineage or faith. See here for an expanded history on the Edomites ([*Idumeans*](#))

These demographic realities did not arise suddenly in the first century but were shaped by earlier post-exilic, political, and prophetic developments that must be considered before examining the Gospel accounts.

III. Intermarriage, Idumean Incorporation, and Prophetic Framing

An accurate understanding of first-century Judaeon identity requires holding together **three converging realities**: post-exilic intermarriage, the later incorporation of Idumeans (Edomites) into Judaeon society, and the prophetic witness concerning Edom’s relationship to Judah and Israel.

Post-Exilic Intermarriage among Returned Judeans

When the remnant of Judah returned from Babylonian exile, Scripture records that intermarriage with surrounding peoples quickly became a serious concern, even among leaders. Ezra describes his grief upon learning that “the people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands” (Ezra 9:1–2). The foreign peoples named—Canaanites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and others—were outside the covenant lineage.

Nehemiah later records the same problem persisting into the next generation:

“In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews’ language” (Nehemiah 13:23–24).

These passages do not suggest that Israel ceased to exist as a people, nor do they provide numerical data concerning the long-term genealogical outcome. They do, however, demonstrate that **ethnic purity was already under strain** in post-exilic Judah, and that “Jew” (*Yehudi*) increasingly functioned as a **community and territorial identity**, rather than a guaranteed marker of unmixed descent from Jacob.¹

Idumean (Edomite) Incorporation into Judaeon Identity

A more dramatic and historically documented shift occurred during the Hasmonean period, roughly a century before Christ. John Hyrcanus I conquered Idumea (biblical Edom) and forcibly incorporated the Idumeans into Judaeon society by compelling circumcision and observance of the Judaeon law.

Josephus records:

“Hyrcanus 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 of the rest of the Jewish ways of living.”²

From this point forward, Idumeans were legally and socially regarded as *Ioudaioi*—Judaeans. This fact is not conjecture but explicit historical testimony. It is within this context that the Herodian dynasty emerged. Herod the Great, Rome’s client king over Judea, was Idumean by descent, not an Israelite, and owed his authority to Roman appointment rather than covenant lineage.³

By the first century, therefore, the term “Jew” or “Judaeen” encompassed **multiple overlapping identities**: descendants of Judah and Benjamin, Levitical families, post-exilic intermarried populations, and Edomite converts who had become politically and socially prominent.

Prophetic Framing: Edom and the Appropriation of Judah

Long before these historical developments unfolded, the prophets framed Edom as a persistent adversary of Judah—not merely through open hostility, but through opportunism and appropriation.

Obadiah offers the most concentrated indictment:

“In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces... even thou wast as one of them” (Obadiah 1:11–14).

Ezekiel expands this theme by recording Edom’s claim upon Judah’s inheritance:

“Because thou hast said, These two nations and these two

countries shall be mine, and we will possess it” (Ezekiel 35:10).

While these prophecies do not predict forced conversion or legal assimilation in explicit terms, they establish a theological pattern: Edom positioning itself to benefit from Judah’s calamity and to lay claim to what God had entrusted to His covenant people. When read alongside the later incorporation of Idumeans into Judaeen society and their rise within Jerusalem’s ruling class, these warnings assume striking relevance.

Identity Tested by Fruit, Not Label

By the time of Christ, “Jew” had become a layered and ambiguous designation—geographic, legal, and religious—rather than a reliable indicator of covenant faithfulness. This reality explains why Jesus consistently rejected lineage claims that were not matched by obedience:

“If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham” (John 8:39).

The New Testament resolves the tension not by denying Israel’s history, but by redefining true identity through faith. Paul’s conclusion is decisive:

“He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly... But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly” (Romans 2:28–29).

Thus, the convergence of post-exilic intermarriage, Idumean incorporation, and prophetic warning provides essential background for understanding the Jerusalem power structure Jesus confronted—and why Scripture consistently insists that identity before God is ultimately discerned by **fruit**, not ancestry, geography, or institutional authority.

IV. Jesus and the Judaeans: A Regional Conflict

The Gospels themselves repeatedly emphasize **regional hostility**, not ethnic condemnation.

John records:

“After these things Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him” (John 7:1).

The contrast is explicit:

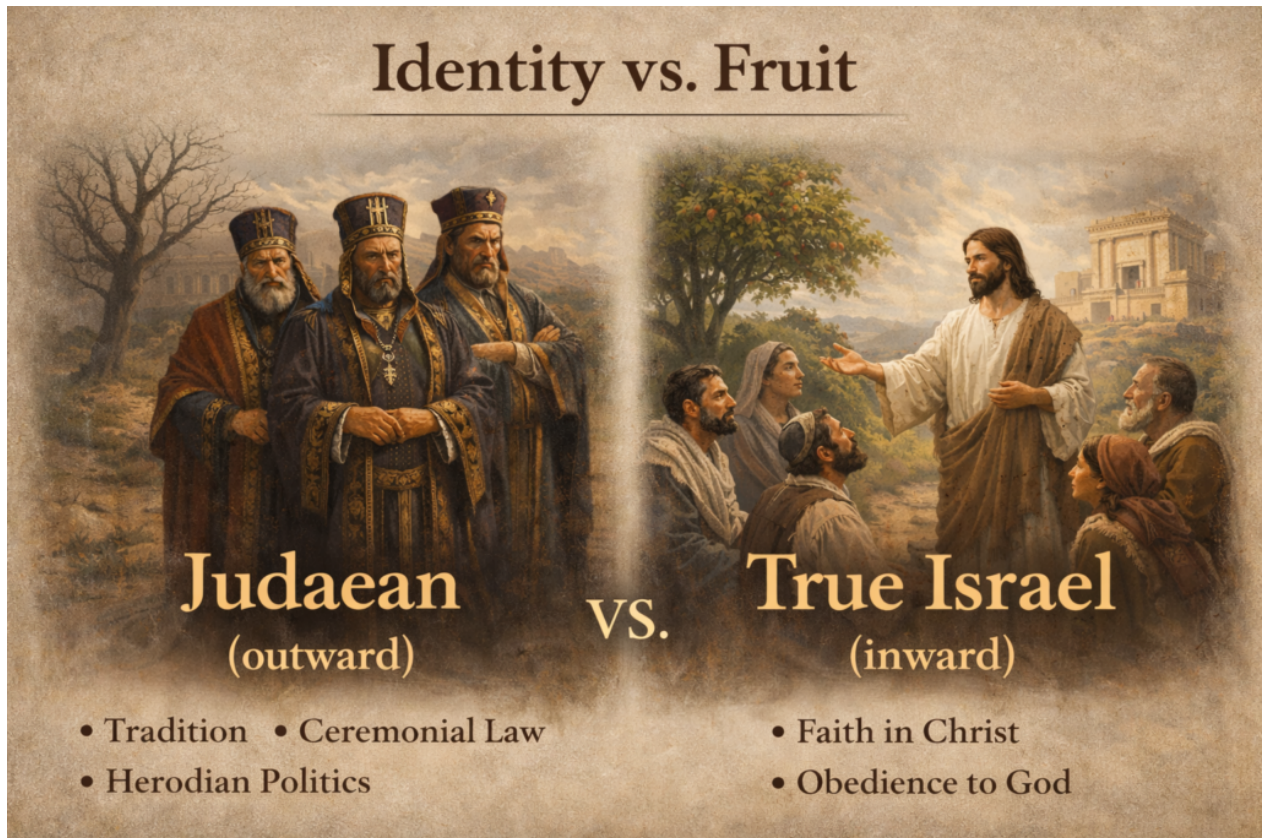
- **Galilee**: receptive crowds, common people, disciples
- **Judea**: ruling elites, hostility, plots of murder

This was not a rejection of “Israelites” as a people, but a confrontation with a **corrupt Jerusalem power structure**.

When Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and rulers, He did not appeal to ancestry but to **spiritual fruit**:

- Hypocrisy
- Legalism
- Love of power
- Rejection of truth

These traits—not bloodlines—defined their identity.



V. “Ye Are of Your Father the Devil” (John 8:44)

One of the most controversial statements of Jesus is found in John 8:44. Read through modern assumptions, it appears as an ethnic denunciation. Read within its historical and theological context, it is something else entirely.

Jesus acknowledged their claim to Abrahamic descent (John 8:39) but rejected it based on behavior:

“If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham.”

Lineage without obedience is meaningless.

This principle aligns perfectly with the prophetic tradition:

- Esau/Edom opposed Jacob/Israel (Genesis 25:23)

- Edom rejoiced over Judah's fall (Obadiah 1:10–14)
- Edom became a perpetual symbol of covenant hostility

Jesus' words identify **spiritual fatherhood**, not genetic makeup.

VI. Paul's Clarification: Who Is a Jew?

The Apostle Paul, himself a Benjaminite (Philippians 3:5), resolves the issue decisively:

*"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly...
But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart" (Romans 2:28–29).*

Paul does not redefine Israel away from Scripture—he completes its meaning in Christ. True covenant identity is:

- Not geographic
- Not political
- Not ceremonial

It is **spiritual**, rooted in faith and obedience.

This harmonizes with:

- Matthew 7:20 (fruit)
 - John 1:12–13 (born of God)
 - Galatians 3:7, 29 (heirs by faith)
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VII. Knowing Them by Their Fruits

Jesus never taught His followers to identify God's people by labels or lineage. He taught discernment by **fruit**.

The fruits of the ruling Judaeen class included:

- Rejection of the Messiah
- Manipulation of the Law
- Alliance with Rome
- Murder of prophets

The fruits of Christ's followers included:

- Repentance
- Faith
- Obedience
- Love of truth

These fruits reveal true identity.

Conclusion: Restoring Biblical Clarity

The confusion surrounding the word "Jew" dissolves once its biblical and historical meaning is restored. In the New Testament, *Ioudaios* primarily denotes **Judaean identity**, not covenant standing. Jesus' conflict was not with Israelites as a people, but with a corrupt, often Edomite-influenced establishment that wielded power in Jerusalem. Scripture consistently teaches that God's people are known not by ancestry or geography, but by faith, obedience, and fruit. True Israel is defined in Christ, not in political or ethnic terms.

The same Scriptures that warn of covenant failure also call

God's people to humility, repentance, and faithfulness. From the prophets to the apostles, identity before God has never been secured by name, lineage, or outward profession, but by obedience flowing from faith. The history surrounding Israel, Judah, and the people later called "Jews" is not preserved merely for academic interest, but as instruction for all who claim the name of God's people. When these lessons are ignored, error and confusion follow. When they are heeded, Scripture becomes clearer, Christ is magnified, and the church is better guarded against the slow corruption of truth by tradition and power.

As believers today, we must heed Christ's words:

"Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them." (Matthew 7:20). The principle in this verse remains as vital now as it was then.

Luke 6:43-45 ⁴³ For a good tree bringeth not forth corrupt fruit; neither doth a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. ⁴⁴ For every tree is known by his own fruit. For of thorns men do not gather figs, nor of a bramble bush gather they grapes.

⁴⁵ A good man out of the good treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart bringeth forth that which is evil: for of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh.
