Who Is a Jew? Examination of Romans 2:28–29 & Israelite Identity

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This verse foreshadows Paul's argument in Romans that outward ritual means nothing without inward transformation.

Jeremiah 9:25–26
"Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will punish all them which are circumcised with the uncircumcised… For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in the heart."

An Old Testament promise of inward heart change anticipates the very spiritual reality Paul affirms.

Deuteronomy 30:6
“And the LORD thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, that thou mayest live.”
An Old Testament promise of inward heart change anticipates the very spiritual reality Paul affirms.

Introduction

The terms *Jew*, *Israelite*, and *Israel* appear frequently throughout the Bible, and though they are often used interchangeably in modern discussion, they carry distinct meanings that are essential to understanding Scripture accurately. In *Romans 2:28–29*, the Apostle Paul makes a theological statement that challenges surface-level understandings of what it means to be a *Jew*:

> *“For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:*
> *But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”*[1]

This passage raises an important interpretive question: When Paul uses the term *Jew*, is he also implying *Israelite*? And can these two terms be understood as synonymous? This essay will examine Paul’s use of *Jew* in Romans 2:28–29, explore the broader biblical distinction between *Jew* and *Israelite*, and offer a neutral, scriptural framework for understanding Paul’s theological intent.

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1. The Historical Background of the Term "Jew"

The term *Jew* in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word **Ἰουδαῖος (*Ioudaios*)**, which originally referred to someone from the **tribe of Judah** or a **resident of the region of Judea**. Over time—especially following the Babylonian exile—the term came to encompass those who practiced **Judaism** or aligned themselves with the religious and political leadership centered in Judea.

In contrast, the term *Israelite* refers to a **descendant of Jacob (also called Israel)** and could pertain to **any of the twelve tribes** of Israel.

- For example, the Apostle Paul refers to himself in this way:

> *"For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin."*[2]

Thus, **Paul was an Israelite but not a Jew in the tribal sense**, since he descended from Benjamin, not Judah.

This helps us understand that **all Jews are Israelites (descendants of Jacob)**, but **not all Israelites are Jews**. The term *Jew* became the dominant label only after the exile, due to the southern kingdom of Judah being the remnant that returned and preserved temple worship.

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2. Paul's Use of "Jew" in Romans 2:28–29

In *Romans 2*, Paul is addressing the problem of reliance on **external religious observance**—particularly circumcision and

possession of the Law—as proof of being God's people. He challenges this confidence by stating:

> *"He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly… But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly."*

This statement is not a direct reference to *Israelite tribal identity*, but a **redefinition of covenant identity**. Paul argues that **true covenantal standing** before God is not about physical circumcision or ethnic descent but about the **heart**—an inward transformation by the Spirit of God.

Matthew Henry notes:

> *"The name and profession of religion will not save a man… That which is inward, in the spirit, is what God values."*[3]

John Gill likewise comments:

> *"The apostle here shows that being a Jew in name or by birth avails nothing without true piety… The inward Jew is the one who is approved by God."*[4]

Paul's point is that **external signs—though once commanded—are insufficient** if they are not matched by **spiritual reality**. This theme runs throughout the New Testament.[5]

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3. Is Paul Equating "Jew" with "Israelite"?

While Paul does not explicitly say, *"He is not an Israelite who is one outwardly,"* the **principle applies broadly**. He is not equating *Jew* with *Israelite* in a tribal or genealogical sense. Rather, he uses the word *Jew*—as it was commonly

understood in his time—as shorthand for one who claims **covenantal status before God**.

This distinction is clarified later in *Romans 9:6*:

> *"For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel."*[6]

Paul here draws a line between:

- **Ethnic or tribal Israel**: Those physically descended from Jacob.
- **Spiritual Israel**: Those who believe and walk in covenant faithfulness.

This reinforces the idea that being born into Israel's lineage does not guarantee inclusion in the promises of God apart from faith and obedience.

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4. Scriptural and Theological Implications

Throughout Scripture, God continually emphasizes that **the heart matters more than externals**:

- *"Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked."*[7]
- *"To obey is better than sacrifice."*[8]
- *"The LORD looketh on the heart."*[9]

Paul is not denying the historical role of Israel or the significance of the Abrahamic covenant. Rather, he is **clarifying its true nature**—that God's covenant people are

those who walk **in faith** and **in the Spirit**, not merely those who possess lineage or outward observance.

His teaching opens the door for **Gentiles to be grafted into the people of God** (Romans 11), not by becoming physical Jews or Israelites, but through **faith in Christ**, who is the true seed of Abraham.[10]

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5. Summary of Key Distinctions

Term	Definition
Israelite	A descendant of Jacob (Israel), from one of the 12 tribes
Jew (Ioudaios)	Originally a member of Judah's tribe or Judea's region; later, a religious identity
True Jew	According to Paul, one inwardly—spiritually circumcised and obedient in heart
True Israel	Those of faith, not merely physical descent (Romans 9:6–8)

Conclusion

In Romans 2:28–29, Paul is not redefining *Jew* as a tribal label, but as a **spiritual identity marker**. He challenges the idea that physical circumcision or descent from Abraham ensures covenant status. Instead, he affirms that true belonging to God's people is measured **by the inward transformation of the heart**.

While Paul uses the word *Jew*, the implications extend beyond ethnic Judahites to encompass the **spiritual criteria** that define the people of God. Thus, Paul's teaching supports the broader biblical theme that **God is concerned not with outward conformity, but with inward obedience**, making room for both

Jew and Gentile to be part of His covenant community through faith in Christ.

Footnotes