From Judahite to Jew: Tracing the Development of a Name

Introduction

The identity of God's people has often been marked not only by covenant but also by names. In Scripture, tribal and territorial labels served as identifiers of lineage, heritage, and faith. Among these, the transition from ***Judahite***—a member of the tribe of Judah—to ***Jew*** as a broader designation, is significant. This development was not instantaneous but unfolded over centuries, shaped by tribal divisions, exile, and political expansion. Understanding this transition clarifies both Old and New Testament usage of the term and helps avoid **anachronistic**[1] assumptions when interpreting the biblical text.

Tribal Demonyms in Early Israel

In the earliest period of Israel's history, names were consistently tied to the twelve sons of Jacob. Scripture records these tribal identifiers plainly: *Benjamites* (Judges 20:35), *Levites* (Exodus 6:25), *Ephraimites* (Judges 12:5).

These are examples of **demonyms**[2], names applied to people based on descent, tribe, or region. At this stage, Judahites were simply those who descended from Judah, one tribe among many.

Judahites in the Monarchy: The First "Jews"

The English Bible first introduces the word *Jews* in the reign of the kings. The Hebrew word is □□□□□□□□ **(yᵊhûdî)**, meaning *a Judahite or Judean* (Strong's H3064 — *Audio Pronunciatio*). The King James Version renders it "Jews" in passages such as:

- "At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drave the **Jews** from Elath" (2 Kings 16:6) [Appendix A, row 1].
- "Speak, I pray thee, to thy servants in the Syrian language… and speak not to us in the **Jews' language**" (2 Kings 18:26) [Appendix A, row 2; cf. Isaiah 36:11, row 4].

Here, the word "Jew" refers to inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah, not to all Israelites collectively. This included not only Judah but also Benjamin and Levites who had moved south after the division of the kingdoms (2 Chronicles 11:13–17).

The Exile and Persian Period: A Community Identity

After the fall of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile, Judah's survivors carried their identity into captivity. Under Persian rule, the province was called **Yehud**, and archaeological finds such as jar-handle stamps confirm the name. During this period, "Jew" expanded beyond tribal descent to a broader community identity:

- Ezra 6:21 records that returnees kept the Passover with "all such as had separated themselves unto them from the

filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the LORD God of Israel" [Appendix A, row 10].
- Esther 8:17 declares that "many of the people of the land became **Jews**," showing proselytes were now embraced into the covenantal community [Appendix A, row 14].

Thus, being a Jew came to signify religious and covenantal allegiance, not merely tribal bloodline.

The Hasmonean Expansion: Forced Conversions

The **Hasmonean dynasty**[3] (2nd–1st centuries BC) further broadened the term. Under John Hyrcanus (~128 BC), the Idumeans (Edomites) were compelled to adopt Jewish laws, including circumcision, and "were hereafter considered Jews." **Josephus**[4] confirms this historical shift.

- **Expanded Note:** ***The Edomites, descendants of Esau, had long been neighbors and sometimes adversaries of Israel. When Hyrcanus subdued Idumea, he forced the Edomites to conform to Jewish law. From that time forward, they were integrated into the Jewish nation. This means that by the first century AD, many who were called Jews were not of pure Israelite descent but of mixed lineage, including Edomites. This is significant because it complicates assumptions about "Jewish identity" in the time of Jesus.***

Greek and Roman Usage: ***Ioudaios***

In the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the Greek term Ἰουδαῖος (Ioudaios – *Audio Pronuciation*) carried dual meaning. It could denote someone geographically from Judea (a political demonym) or someone religiously identified with the Jewish faith. This ambiguity carried into the New Testament. For example:

- At times it signifies regional identity, such as "Jesus walked in Galilee: for he would not walk in Jewry, because the Jews sought to kill him" (John 7:1) [Appendix A, row 19].
- At other times it highlights religious opposition, such as the confrontations between Jesus and "the Jews" (John 5:16) [Appendix A, row 18].
- Yet, "many of the Jews… believed on him" after Lazarus was raised (John 11:45) [Appendix A, row 22].

Modern scholarship continues to debate whether "Jew" or "Judean" is the better translation in particular contexts. For further study, see discussions in **Brill academic articles**, where scholars like ***Steve Mason***[5] and Adele Reinhartz analyze how *Ioudaios* was used in both political and religious senses.

- **Footnote Condensation of Mason**: ***Steve Mason argues that in the Greco-Roman world, Ioudaios/Iudaeus denoted primarily a peoplehood tied to Judea—its land, ancestry, and ancestral customs—rather than a "religion" in the modern sense. The term Ioudaismos ("Judaism") is rare, appearing mainly in the Maccabean literature in contrast with Hellenismos, and means "alignment with Judean ways." Major Jewish authors like Josephus and Philo avoid Ioudaismos, preferring to speak of the laws or customs of the Judeans. The sharp dichotomy "Judaism vs. Christianity" develops later in Christian writings, which set the two in contrast as rival paths. Thus,***

translating Ioudaios as "Jew(s)" with modern religious overtones risks anachronism; often "Judean(s)" is clearer where geography or ethnicity is intended.

- **Brill Articles on "Ioudaios"**: ***Brill publishes scholarly works on the debated meaning of Ioudaios. See Steve Mason, Jews, Judeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History (Journal for the Study of Judaism, Brill, 2007). Abstract: Summary here See the full PDF article HERE.***

Conclusion

The word *Jew* did not emerge in a vacuum but developed through Israel's history. What began as a simple tribal designation (*Judahite*) broadened during the monarchy to denote citizens of Judah, and later in exile to describe a covenantal community inclusive of converts. By the Hasmonean and Roman periods, the term carried both religious and political connotations, applied even to those outside of Jacob's line who nevertheless lived under Judean law or identified with Jewish practice.

Recognizing this progression helps us read Scripture with discernment. When the Bible speaks of *Jews*, we must ask: is the context tribal, territorial, religious, or political? The answer provides clarity for interpretation and safeguards against misunderstanding. As Proverbs 25:2 reminds us: *"It is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter."*

Supplementary Section

Background Study: The Modern Idea of "Judeo-Christian"

The expression **"Judeo-Christian"** is not an ancient term but a modern one, especially prominent in American and European public discourse from the mid-20th century onward. It arose to stress common moral ground—ethical monotheism, the Ten Commandments, and human dignity—between Jewish and Christian communities, particularly in response to secularism and totalitarianism.

Yet in antiquity, Christians did not speak of themselves as **"Judeo-Christian."** Instead, they contrasted themselves with what they called "Judaism," portraying the new covenant in Christ as the fulfillment and replacement of the old (Hebrews 8:13; Colossians 2:16–17). As ***Steve Mason*** shows, "Judaism" as a discrete religion was itself a later construction, sharpened in Christian polemics. Therefore, applying the modern **"Judeo-Christian"** framework back into Scripture is anachronistic.

While the phrase has civic usefulness today, biblically and historically it risks obscuring the decisive covenantal shift in Christ. For careful readers, this reminder guards against blending categories that the apostles and early church kept distinct.

Appendix A — Key KJV Occurrences of "Jew(s)" with "Meaning in Context"

Below are the categories used in Appendix A with examples:

- 1. **Judeans (citizens of Judah)**
  - Refers to people of the kingdom or province of Judah, not the whole nation of Israel. — **2 Kings 16:6** — "*Rezin … drave the **Jews** from Elath*" = citizens of Judah

- 2. **Judean (language/dialect)**
  - Not a people group but the dialect of Judah. – **2 Kings 18:26** – *"Speak … not to us in the **Jews' language**"* = the Judean dialect.

- **Community members (incl. joiners)**
  - Used after the exile, when "Jew" meant belonging to the restored community of faith. – **Ezra 6:21** – Returnees + those who separated themselves from the nations ate the Passover.

- 4. **Proselytes / became Jews**
  - Those from outside who joined Israel's covenant community. – ***Esther 8:17*** – *"Many … became Jews."*

- 5. **Judean leaders/authorities**
  - Specifically the religious or political establishment of Judea, often hostile to Jesus.
    - **John 5:16** – *"The **Jews** did persecute Jesus"* = the leaders, not all the people.
    - **John 9:22** – Parents fear being cast out of the synagogue by the leaders.

- 6. **General population**
  - Ordinary people of Judea, sometimes positive in response. – **John 11:45** – *"Many of the **Jews** … believed on him."*

- 7. **Diaspora Jews (pilgrims or residents outside Judea)**
  - Refers to Jewish populations scattered across the empire.
    - **Acts 2:5** – *"There were dwelling at Jerusalem **Jews**, devout men, out of every nation under heaven."*

        - **Acts 18:2** – Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome.

- 8. **Jew by heritage / self-identification**
    - Ethnic or ancestral usage, often in Paul's own testimony. – **Acts 21:39** – Paul: *"I am a man which am a **Jew** of Tarsus."*

- 9. **Covenantal / theological sense**
    - Paul's redefinition of true Jewishness as inward covenant faith. – **Romans 2:28–29** – "He is a **Jew**, which is one inwardly."

- 10. **Ambiguous/contested identity**
    - Cases where "Jew" was a claim but contested in meaning. – **Revelation 2:9; 3:9** – *"Which say they are **Jews**, and are not."*

Sample Table (abbreviated):

The column **"Meaning in Context"** shows the clearest way to read the word *Jew(s)* in each verse. Because the Hebrew □□□□□□□□ **(yᵊhûdî)** and Greek **Ἰουδαῖος (Ioudaios)** had overlapping political, geographic, religious, and covenantal meanings, context determines the sense. See expanded table at end of this page.

Ref.	Context	Original Term	Meaning in Context	NT Category	Brief Note
2 Kings 16:6	Monarchy (Ahaz)	Heb. yehudim	Judeans (citizens of Judah)	–	Political/territorial identity.

Ref.	Context	Original Term	Meaning in Context	NT Category	Brief Note
2 Kings 18:26	Assyrian siege	Heb. yehudit	Judean (language/dialect)	–	Dialect label, not religion.
Esther 8:17	Persian empire	Heb. yehudim	Proselytes / became Jews	–	Many “became Jews.”
John 5:16	NT – Sabbath	Gk. Ioudaioi	Judean leaders opposing Jesus	Leaders/Authorities	Hostility over Sabbath healing.
John 11:45	NT – Lazarus	Gk. Ioudaioi	General Judeans (many believed)	General population	Many believed on Him.
Acts 2:5	NT – Pentecost	Gk. Ioudaioi	Diaspora Jews (religious pilgrims)	General population	Devout men from every nation.
Romans 2:28-29	Pauline theology	Gk. Ioudaios	Jew inwardly (spiritual)	Redefinition	Circumcision of the heart.

Appendix B – Translation Notes: When “Judean” is Clearer than “Jew”

1. **2 Kings 16:6; 18:26; Isaiah 36:11** – In these early monarchy passages, “Jew(s)” means *citizens of Judah*, not a universal religious identity. Translating as *Judean(s)* avoids confusion.
2. **Ezra 6:21; Esther 8:17** – The term broadens to include converts and covenant joiners; “Jews” here means the *faith community*.
3. **John 5:16; John 7:1; John 9:22** – “The Jews” = *Judean authorities/leaders*, not all Israelites. Modern readers often miss this nuance.
4. **John 11:45; Acts 2:5** – In these, “the Jews” refers to the *general population* or diaspora pilgrims. Keeping “Jew” is fine, but “Judeans” (in John 11) or “Jewish pilgrims” (in Acts 2) would give clearer sense.
5. **Romans 2:28-29** – Paul redefines “Jew” spiritually: inward covenant identity, not external descent. No translation change, but theological context must be stressed.

6. **Revelation 2:9; 3:9** – “Those who say they are Jews, and are not” highlights contested identity claims. Translation is accurate, but interpretive caution is needed.

Footnotes:

Appendix ‘A’: This Table is used when row cited

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