Who Is a Jew? Understanding the Biblical and Historical Evolution of Jewish Identity

Introduction

In the realm of Christian thought, few terms are used as frequently—and as imprecisely—as the word *Jew*. From pulpits to prophecy conferences, in politics and public commentary, we often hear references to "the Jews," whether in historical, theological, or geopolitical discussions. Yet, remarkably little effort is made to define who the "Jews" actually are. Are they the same as the Israelites of old? Are they a single, identifiable ethnic group? Can anyone become a Jew through religion? And what do the Scriptures and history truly reveal about the people who bear this name?

This question is more than academic—it is deeply spiritual. Our understanding of Scripture, prophecy, and the identity of God's covenant people hinges on it. Misidentifying the Jews of today with the Israelites of the Bible without proper scrutiny leads to misinterpretation of entire theological frameworks, including eschatology, election, and covenant. To arrive at the truth, we must turn not to assumptions or traditions, but to Scripture and historical evidence.

Israel: A Nation of Twelve Tribes

The term *Israelite* properly refers to the descendants of the twelve sons of Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel—Genesis 32:28). Each tribe retained its unique identity: Judahites,

Benjaminites, Levites, Reubenites, and so on. Together, they formed the covenant nation of Israel under Moses. To be an Israelite was to be part of this ethnic lineage—God's chosen people through the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 19:5-6).

A Kingdom Divided and Carried Away

After King Solomon's reign, the nation split into two kingdoms:

- The **Northern Kingdom** (Israel), composed of ten tribes, centered in Samaria.
- The **Southern Kingdom** (Judah), consisting primarily of Judah and Benjamin, and based in Jerusalem.

The Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria around 722 BC, and its people were scattered among the nations (2 Kings 17:6), effectively losing their national identity. These became known as the "lost tribes" of Israel.

Later, in 586 BC, the Southern Kingdom was exiled to Babylon. After 70 years, a remnant returned under the Persian decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1-3), primarily consisting of those from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi (Ezra 1:5). From this point forward, the term *Jew* (from *Yehudi*, meaning of Judah) began to gain prominence as a general label for these returning Israelites.

The Word "Jew": Ethnic,

Geographical, or Religious?

By the time of the return from Babylon, “Jew” was initially used to describe someone from the tribe of Judah or from the land of Judea. However, as history progressed, the term became more religious and political than genealogical. In the New Testament, the Greek word *Ioudaios* is often translated as “Jew,” but it could mean:

- Someone from the region of Judea,
- Someone practicing the Jewish religion (Judaism),
- Or someone of the lineage of Judah.

Thus, not everyone called a “Jew” in Scripture was necessarily an Israelite by blood. Some were religious converts, some were political allies, and some were ethnically mixed or foreign altogether.

Mass Conversions into Judaism Before the First Century

Significant historical events between the Old and New Testaments expanded the definition of “Jew.” Under the Hasmonean dynasty (140–37 BC), especially during the reign of **John Hyrcanus**, entire non-Israelite populations were forcibly converted to Judaism:

> *“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 the rest of the*

> *Jewish ways of living; at which time therefore this befell them, that they were hereafter no other than Jews."*[1]

This included **Idumeans (Edomites)**, who were descendants of Esau. Notably, **Herod the Great**, king of Judea during the birth of Christ, was an Idumean by blood, yet ruled over the "Jews."[2]

The Ituraeans, Nabataeans, and other peoples from Arabia and surrounding territories also adopted Jewish customs or were integrated into Jewish society during this period.[3] These conversions, often driven by political expedience or military conquest, further diluted the ethnic purity of the Jewish people.

Jesus' Confrontation with the "Jews"

In John 8, Jesus delivers a piercing rebuke to the religious rulers who claimed to be the seed of Abraham:

> *"I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you." (John 8:37, KJV)*

> *"If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham." (John 8:39, KJV)*

Jesus acknowledges that they may be physically descended from Abraham (as were Ishmael and Esau), but they were **not** of the **spiritual line of promise**—those who believed and obeyed as Abraham did. The promise passed through Isaac and Jacob, not Ishmael or Esau. Though Esau was of Abraham's seed, he lost his birthright and spiritual inheritance (Hebrews 12:16-17).

Furthermore, Esau intermarried with the daughters of Ishmael (Genesis 28:9), merging two rejected lines from the covenantal promise.

Thus, not all physical descendants of Abraham are considered *children of God* (Romans 9:6-8). This is a vital distinction often missed in discussions surrounding the Jews.

Modern-Day Jews: Who Are They?

Today, the term *Jew* typically refers to those who follow the religion of Judaism or identify culturally as Jewish. However, many Jews today are:

- Descendants of converts (e.g., Edomites, Khazars, etc.),
- Culturally or religiously Jewish, but not ethnically descended from Jacob,
- Ashkenazi or Sephardic, with divergent histories and genealogies.

The well-known historian **Shlomo Sand**, in *The Invention of the Jewish People*, wrote:

> *"There is no such thing as a Jewish people with a single origin. The Jewish people as we know it today are an amalgam of various groups who adopted Judaism over centuries."*[4]

Genetic studies and historical analyses have repeatedly shown that modern Jews do not represent a unified ethnic group.[5] While some may trace ancestry to ancient Israelites, many others cannot.

Why This Matters: Theological Clarity

Understanding who a Jew truly is has major implications:

- **Scripturally**, it prevents the misapplication of Old Testament prophecies to modern political entities.
- **Spiritually**, it reveals that true Israel is not of the flesh, but of faith (Galatians 3:29).
- **Historically**, it corrects centuries of assumptions and exposes theological errors based on lineage instead of obedience and faith in Christ.

As Paul affirms:

> *"For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly… But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly…" (Romans 2:28-29, KJV)*

And:

> *"If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." (Galatians 3:29, KJV)*

Conclusion: Let Scripture Define Identity

The term *Jew* has evolved over millennia—from tribal Judahite, to resident of Judea, to follower of Judaism, and finally to a global ethnic-religious designation. This evolution must be understood in order to properly interpret Scripture and to rightly divide truth. Not all who are called Jews are Israelites. Not all who are Israelites are Jews. And not all

who claim Abraham as their father are children of the promise.

The Word of God—not tradition, politics, or media—must define our understanding of God's people. The true children of God are those who are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God (John 1:13).

Footnotes

1. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 13, Chapter 9, Section 1.
2. Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 6.
3. Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Vol. I, T&T Clark, 1973.
4. Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People*, Verso Books, 2009.
5. Eran Elhaik, "The Missing Link of Jewish European Ancestry: Contrasting the Rhineland and the Khazarian Hypotheses," *Genome Biology and Evolution*, 2012.