

Ethnic / National / Religious Groups in Biblical Times

Introduction:

The Greek term *ethnos* literally just means “nation” or “people” or “ethnic group,” although in the Bible it often refers collectively to all the *other* nations except for the Jews. Since most “nations” in biblical times had their own religion and their own gods, there is much overlap between what we today might distinguish: nation states vs. ethnic groups vs. religious groups. Thus, “Jews” in the Bible are both an ethnic group and a religious group.

The “Jews” of today have had a very long history and a complex heritage, including but not limited to the Jews of biblical times. Today they are both a religious group and an ethnic group, but not exclusively either of these (that is, many of today’s religious “Jews” come from other ethnic groups, and some ethnic “Jews” today no longer practice the Jewish religion). In different historical eras and geographical locations, however, they have been called by a variety of different names (Jews, Judeans, Israelites, Israelis, Hebrews, Palestinians, etc.), each of which has a particular origin and meaning.

These terms are all inter-connected, but with some significant differences. They all refer to people who consider themselves the “Twelve Tribes of Israel,” descendants of the “Twelve Sons of Jacob,” and thus ultimately the “Children of Abraham.” On the other hand, Arabs, Muslims, Samaritans, and even Christians also consider themselves to be descendants of Abraham, although in significantly different ways.

Ancient Jews, their Ancestors, and their Descendants:

Children of Abraham – people who claim Abraham as their father (literally or figuratively, by birth or by faith). This term can encompass Jews, Arabs, Muslims, Samaritans, and Christians:

- **Abraham** (originally called Abram) eventually had two sons, even though his wife **Sarah** (originally called Sarai) was thought to be unable to bear any children (Gen 12-25):
 - Since Sarah was childless at first, Abraham’s first son **Ishmael** was born to Sarah’s slave **Hagar** (a common practice in ancient times; see Gen 16).
 - But **Sarah** herself later also had a son, named **Isaac**, and some rivalries developed between the mothers, which eventually split the family (Gen 21).
 - In the next generation, Isaac also had two sons, twins named **Esau** and **Jacob** (Gen 25), each of whom had numerous descendants themselves (Gen 35:23—37:1).
 - Jacob’s name was later changed to **Israel** (Gen 32:28; 35:10; see “Israelites” below).
- **Jews** see themselves as physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham, through his son Isaac and grandson Jacob.
 - Although Isaac was younger than Ishmael, and Jacob younger than Esau, the Jews consider themselves the ones chosen by God as legitimate heirs of the covenantal promises God made to Abraham (Gen 17:20-22; 22:16-18; 27:1-45; 49:1-12)
- **Arabs** also claim to be physical descendants of Abraham, but through his first son, Ishmael (see Gen 25:12-15), or his grandson, Esau (Gen 36:9-19).
 - Since Ishmael was older than Isaac, and Esau also older than Jacob, Arabs see themselves as the “older sons,” and thus the legitimate heirs of Abraham.
 - Recognizing this close common heritage is necessary for beginning to understand the animosity between Jews and Arabs over the centuries.
 - Muslims from other ethnic groups also consider themselves to be “spiritual” children of Abraham.
- **Christians** also claim to be Abraham’s descendants (Gal 3; Rom 4), but through “faith” or spiritual “adoption” (Gal 4; Rom 8), rather than physical descent.

Hebrews – an alternate designation for the people of Israel, the Jews, both in ancient and modern times:

- In the OT, “**Hebrews**” refers to an ethnic group, esp. in contrast to the Egyptians (Gen 43:32; Exod 1:19) or other nations (Jonah 1:9).
 - Many scholars think the word “Hebrew” is derived from “Eber,” one of Abraham’s ancestors (Gen 10:24-25, 11:14-26).
 - Some suggest that the word *apiru* or *habiru* (found in various Ancient Near Eastern documents) refers to early Hebrews.
- “**Hebrew**” also refers to the ancient Semitic *language* in which most of the Bible (Old Testament) was written.
 - By the time of Jesus, most Jews no longer spoke Hebrew, but rather Aramaic, a closely related Semitic language; yet many Jews still read the Bible in Hebrew.
 - Hebrew almost died out as a living language; but “modern Hebrew,” based on biblical Hebrew, was resurrected in 19th century.
 - In NT, “Hebrew” sometimes refers more loosely to the Aramaic language commonly spoken at the time of Jesus (cf. John 19:13, 17, 20; etc.)

- In the NT, one book is called "To the Hebrews" not because it was originally written in the Hebrew language, nor because it was addressed to Jews, but because it seems to have been addressed to Christians from a Jewish religious and/or ethnic background.

Israelites – the most common term for the ancient people belonging to the twelve tribes of Israel:

- One of Abraham's grandsons was initially named Jacob, but later received the name **Israel** (Gen 25:26; 32:28; 35:10).
 - Note: this name is properly spelled Isr-A-E-L, not Isr-E-A-L, although it is usually pronounced with a long "EE" in English.
- The twelve sons of Jacob (Gen 29:31—30:24; 35:16-20; summarized in 35:23-26) are considered to be the ancestors of the "**twelve tribes of Israel**" (Gen 49:28).
 - During the days of Moses, Joshua, the Judges, and the early Kings (Saul, David, Solomon), "Israel" and "Israelite" still refers to the whole people, from all twelve of the tribes.
- Following the split of the "Kingdom of David" in 922 BCE, the ten northern tribes comprised what continued to be called the "**Kingdom of Israel**," in contrast to the "Kingdom of Judah" in the South (which consisted of the tribe of Judah and the much smaller tribe of Benjamin).
 - Both of these kingdoms are eventually taken over by foreign empires (the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians in 721 BCE, the Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians by 587 BCE).
 - Even before the time of Jesus, people were hoping for the reestablishment of the "Kingdom of Israel," meaning not just the ten northern tribes, but all twelve of the tribes of Israel.
- The modern state of Israel was not re-established until 1948, following World War II, but mandate of the United Nations.
 - Citizens of the modern state of Israel are called "**Israelis**," in contrast to the "Israelites" of ancient times.

Judahites / Judeans / Jews – closely related names stemming from slightly different historical eras:

- **Judahites** - a term for the inhabitants of the southern Kingdom of Judah after 922 BCE.
- **Judeans** - the Greek term for the inhabitants of *Judea*, the territory formerly called "*Judah*."
- **Jews** - a later English shorthand term derived from the Greek word "Judeans"

Galileans – people in or from the Northern regions of Israel, esp. West of the Sea of Galilee (a.k.a. Sea of Tiberias, Lake of Gennesaret, etc.).

- The area inhabited by the several ancient Israelite tribes after the conquest of the land led by Joshua (1200's BCE).
 - Namely, the tribes of Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, and Dan (see Joshua 19:10-48; 20:7; 21:32).
- Part of the (Northern) Kingdom of Israel, after the death of King Solomon and the division of the kingdom (ca. 930 BCE).
 - Conquered by the Assyrians, along with the rest of the Northern Kingdom, in the 720's BCE (2 Kings 15:29; Isaiah 9:1).
 - Thus not inhabited by Israelites for several centuries, but by people resettled from other parts of the Assyrian Empire.
- Reconquered and resettled by the Judeans (Jews) during the period of the Maccabees (late 2nd Cent. BCE).
 - Yet geographically separated from the heart of Judea by the (hostile) region of Samaria.
- Part of Herod the Great's Kingdom (40-4 BCE); then ruled by his son, Herod Antipas (4 BCE - 39 CE; see Luke 3:1; 23:6-11).
 - Although culturally/religiously Jews, Galileans apparently had a distinct accent (Mark 14:70; Matt 26:69-75; Luke 22:59; Acts 2:7).
 - They may have been looked down upon by other Judeans (John 1:43-46; 7:41, 52).

Palestinians – originally refers to all the inhabitants of the geographic region of Palestine; now refers more specifically to certain sub-groups:

- "Palestine" was the name given by the Romans to the territory of Israel after the Second Jewish War (132-135 CE).
 - It was derived from the name "Philistines," ancient enemies of the Hebrews who also lived in the same territory.
- In the 19th and early 20th centuries, "Palestinians" referred to *all* the people living in the Holy Land.
 - This it included Palestinian Jews, Palestinian Arabs, and Palestinian Christians.
- Today, "Palestinians" generally refers to the non-Jewish Arabs living in Israel, including those from there but now living in exile in other countries.
 - Note that while most modern Palestinians are Muslim, there still are some Palestinian Arab Christians.

Israelis – the citizens and inhabitants of the State of Israel, since its founding in 1948.

- The term "Israelis" (in the modern State of Israel) should not be confused with "Israelites" (the ancient inhabitants), as explained above.
- Although most inhabitants of Israel today are Jews (including some Palestinian Jews and many Jewish immigrants from other parts of the world), one should not forget that some citizens of Israel are Arabs, Muslims, and/or Christians.

Terms Used for Non-Jewish Groups in the Ancient World:

Samaritans – people from the region of Samaria (the ancient Northern Kingdom of Israel, whose capital city was also called Samaria):

- Samaritans are descendants of the ten Northern Tribes, the Ancient Kingdom of Israel, which separated from the two Southern Tribes (Judah & Benjamin) after the death of King Solomon (ca. 930 BC).
- This “Northern Kingdom” was conquered by the Assyrians in 721 BC; many of the inhabitants were taken into exile while people from other parts of the Assyrian Empire were resettled in the territories of Israel. Thus, the Israelite inhabitants eventually intermingled and intermarried with the non-Israelite immigrants.
- The Samaritans only accepted the Pentateuch (the Torah, the first five books of the HB, attributed to Moses) as canonical or scriptural. They did not recognize or use the rest of the HB, books that were written predominantly in the Southern Kingdom after the division of the two kingdoms.
- Jews and Samaritans disdained each other over the centuries, due to various conflicts and rivalries.
- The Gospel of Mark never mentions Samaritans, while the Matthean Jesus explicitly instructs his disciples to avoid Samaritan villages (Matt 10:5-6).
- In Luke’s Gospel, one Samaritan village rejects Jesus (Luke 9:52-53), but rather than calling down punishment from heaven upon them, Jesus and his disciples simply go to another (also Samaritan) village; the Lukan Jesus also uses a Samaritan as the compassionate central character of a parable (Luke 10:29-37), and one of the ten lepers cleansed by Jesus is a Samaritan (Luke 17:11-17).
- In John, Jesus encounters a Samaritan woman at a well, and also accepts the hospitality of a Samaritan village for a few days (John 4).
- Samaria evidently becomes a center of missionary activity in the early Church (Acts 1:8; 8:4-25).

Gentiles – a general term referring to any and all people who are not Jews:

- **Nations:** the Greek term *ethnos* literally means “nation,” but if it seems in the Bible to refer to all the *other* nations, outside of Israel, it is often translated “Gentile” (or “pagan” in some older translations).
- **Greeks:** can refer either specifically to the people from Greece (2 Macc 4:10-15), or more generally to any Greek-speaking person living in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire (Mark 7:26; John 7:35; etc.).
- **Romans:**
 - official representatives of the Roman Emperor or Empire (John 11:48, Acts 25:16)
 - those who pledged allegiance to Rome (Acts 16:21)
 - citizens of the city and/or empire of (Acts 22:25-29)
 - Jews who had been born in Rome or resided there (Acts 2:10)
- **Barbarians:** a term used for people outside the Hellenistic and/or Roman worlds (depends on who the speaker is).

Christians – not just *one* ethnic or national group, but *all* people who believe in Jesus as the “Christ”

- Although the first disciples/believers in Jesus were all Jews, they were soon joined by people of Gentile origins.
- The term “Christian” is derived from the Greek word *Christos*, equivalent to the Hebrew word *Messias*, both of which simply mean “the anointed one” (John 1:41; 4:25), and are used as the most common [Christological Titles](#) for Jesus of Nazareth.
- “Christian” is first applied to the believers in the Greek-speaking city of Antioch, the capital of the Roman Province of Syria and third-largest city of the Roman Empire (Acts 11:26); it is used only two other times in the entire NT (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16)
- Before being called “Christians”, these people probably referred to themselves as “believers,” “disciples,” “brothers/sisters,” or “saints,” while outsiders may have called them “Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5), or followers of “the Way” (Acts 9:2; 18:25; 19:9, 23; etc.).