

## Hebrew Study Notes

Gen 14:11 So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way.

Gen 14:12 They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions, and went their way.

Gen 14:13 Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner. These were allies of Abram.

Gen 14:14 When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Gen 14:15 And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus.

Gen 14:16 Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.

- More on this later, but we see Abram viewed as an outsider in the area and thus designated “the Hebrew” (derived from Eber or Eberite, meaning “one who crossed over”).
- This reference is valid as Abram “crossed over” the Euphrates when he left Ur of the Chaldees for the land of promise.
- First reference in scripture to “Hebrew”.

Gen 39:11 But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house,

Gen 39:12 she caught him by his garment, saying, “Lie with me.” But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house.

Gen 39:13 And as soon as she saw that he had left his garment in her hand and had fled out of the house,

Gen 39:14 she called to the men of her household and said to them, “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us. He came in to me to lie with me, and I cried out with a loud voice.

Gen 39:15 And as soon as he heard that I lifted up my voice and cried out, he left his garment beside me and fled and got out of the house.”

Gen 39:16 Then she laid up his garment by her until his master came home,

Gen 39:17 and she told him the same story, saying, “The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought among us, came in to me to laugh at me.

- Also, in the case of Potiphar’s wife and her accusation against Joseph, she repeatedly refers to him as “the Hebrew” to emphasize his outsider status in Egypt.
- This continues into the account of Moses’ birth in Egypt and his later confrontations with Pharaoh even referring to Jehovah as “the God of the Hebrews”.

## 1. “Hebrew” — Ethnic or Cultural Designation

**Hebrew** is usually the **earliest designation** and often appears when Israelites are viewed **by outsiders or in cross-cultural settings**.

### Typical characteristics

- Used especially in **Genesis and Exodus**
- Often used by **foreigners** referring to the people of Abraham
- Sometimes refers to **language or cultural heritage**

### Examples

- Abraham is called “**Abram the Hebrew**” (Genesis 14:13).
- Joseph is described by Egyptians as a **Hebrew servant** (Genesis 39:14).
- Moses is hidden by **Hebrew parents** (Exodus 2:1).

### Meaning

The term likely relates to the root meaning “**one who crossed over**” or possibly to the ancestor **Eber** (Genesis 10–11).

So **Hebrew emphasizes origin or ethnicity**.

## 2. “Israelite” — Covenant/National Identity

**Israelite** refers specifically to the descendants of **Jacob**, whose name was changed to *Israel* (Genesis 32:28).

### Typical characteristics

- Most common during the **nation’s formation**
- Emphasizes membership in the **covenant people**
- Used frequently in the historical books

### Examples

- The people delivered in the **Exodus from Egypt** are called **the Israelites**.
- The tribes during the period of **Book of Judges** are described as **the people of Israel**.

### Meaning

**Israelite = member of the covenant nation descended from Jacob.**

This term highlights **religious and national identity**.

## 3. “Jew” — Tribal and Later Ethnic Identity

The term **Jew** comes from the tribe and kingdom of **Tribe of Judah**.

### Historical development

After the northern kingdom fell to Assyria (722 BC), the southern kingdom of **Judah** remained the main surviving political entity.

As a result:

- People of Judah became known as **Jews**
- Eventually the term applied broadly to the whole surviving community

## Examples

- Mordecai is called “**a Jew**” in **Book of Esther**.
- In the New Testament, **Jew** becomes the normal ethnic term.

## 4. New Testament Distinctions

The New Testament still preserves subtle differences.

For example, Paul the Apostle writes:

“A Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5)

Here he distinguishes:

- **Jew** → ethnic/national identity
- **Hebrew** → cultural/linguistic heritage (traditional Hebrew upbringing)

Php 3:3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Php 3:4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more:

Php 3:5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;

Php 3:6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Php 3:7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

- Paul would inform the Philippians that those who worship God in spirit and glory in Christ are now part of the “circumcision” spiritually (having been circumcised in their hearts).
- He associates his former life and the confidence he had in the flesh as part of his Hebrew nature (association with Abraham) that he has now exchanged for a greater confidence in Christ.

Gen 32:24 And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.

Gen 32:25 When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.

Gen 32:26 Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.”

Gen 32:27 And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.”

Gen 32:28 Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.”

- Through Jacob, the family became the “children of Israel” or Israelites.
- Technically, any descendants of Eber could be considered Eberite (Hebrew), but only those descended from Jacob would be Israelite.

1Ki 12:21 When Rehoboam came to Jerusalem, he assembled all the house of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, 180,000 chosen warriors, to fight against the house of Israel, to restore the kingdom to Rehoboam the son of Solomon.

1Ki 12:22 But the word of God came to Shemaiah the man of God:

1Ki 12:23 "Say to Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, and to all the house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people,

1Ki 12:24 'Thus says the LORD, You shall not go up or fight against your relatives the people of Israel. Every man return to his home, for this thing is from me.'" So they listened to the word of the LORD and went home again, according to the word of the LORD.

1Ki 12:25 Then Jeroboam built Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim and lived there. And he went out from there and built Penuel.

1Ki 12:26 And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David.

1Ki 12:27 If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah."

1Ki 12:28 So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt."

1Ki 12:29 And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan.

1Ki 12:30 Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one.

1Ki 12:31 He also made temples on high places and appointed priests from among all the people, who were not of the Levites.

- Rehoboam, son of Solomon, neglected the counsel of his father's advisors (to lessen the burdens placed on the nation by his father's extensive building projects) and agreed with his own advisors that he should increase taxation to further his own legacy. This led to a rise in support for Jeroboam who became "the people's champion" especially in the northern tribes.
- The 10 northern tribes seceded from the nation becoming Israel and Judah and Benjamin became known as Judah (Judea).
- This division would last until most of the northern kingdom and Samaria were consumed by Assyrian invaders and repopulated by other people groups becoming known, in general terms, as Samaria for the remaining Old Testament period and into the earthly ministry of Christ.

2Ki 17:13 Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, "Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the Law that I commanded your fathers, and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets."

2Ki 17:14 But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.

2Ki 17:15 They despised his statutes and his covenant that he made with their fathers and the warnings that he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were around them, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them that they should not do like them.

2Ki 17:16 And they abandoned all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves metal images of two calves; and they made an Asherah and worshiped all the host of heaven and served Baal.

2Ki 17:17 And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings and used divination and omens and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

2Ki 17:18 Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them out of his sight. None was left but the tribe of Judah only.

- During the divided kingdom, Israel never had a king that “did what was right in the eyes of the Lord” and Judah had very few.
- When Hoshea reigned over Samaria and Israel, Assyria besieged the cities for three years and eventually carried off many exiles and Israel ceased existence as its own sovereign nation.

2Ki 17:26 So the king of Assyria was told, “The nations that you have carried away and placed in the cities of Samaria do not know the law of the god of the land. Therefore he has sent lions among them, and behold, they are killing them, because they do not know the law of the god of the land.”

2Ki 17:27 Then the king of Assyria commanded, “Send there one of the priests whom you carried away from there, and let him go and dwell there and teach them the law of the god of the land.”

2Ki 17:28 So one of the priests whom they had carried away from Samaria came and lived in Bethel and taught them how they should fear the LORD.

2Ki 17:29 But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the shrines of the high places that the Samaritans had made, every nation in the cities in which they lived.

- The Assyrian king tried to appease the “god of the land” by having a priest instruct the new transplants on how to live according to his laws so the lion infestation would cease.
- Those living in the land came from polytheistic cultures and had no issue with adding another god or set of commandments to their religious practice. This blending of Jehovah’s laws with other pagan gods gave rise to the Samaritan religious system that was still very much in practice during Christ’s earthly ministry. Much of this is discussed in John 4 when Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at the well.
- The laws and the ethnic blending of people groups in Samaria led to the prejudices between them and the Jews.

Est 3:4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew.

Est 3:5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.

Est 3:6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

- Later in their history, the term “Jew” (Judean) was more applied to those living abroad (exile, captivity, etc.) and is the main term used in books such as Ester, Ezra, and Nehemiah.
- This is a prevalent term in New Testament times as well unless using “Hebrew” as more of a cultural or linguistic description.
- This further narrowed the classification (Eberite or Hebrew could be any descending from Eber, Israelite could be any descending from Jacob, Jew or Judean could be any still identifying as all of the above but able to show lineage throughout multiple occupations, invasions, and exiles).