

Who are the Jews

What Does the Torah / Tanakh Say a “Jew” Actually Is

Start with this foundation

In the **Torah**, people are identified by:

- **tribe**
- **lineage**
- **covenant**

Not by modern religious labels.

A. What the Word “Jew” Originally Meant (Biblical Meaning)

The English word “**Jew**” comes from the Hebrew:

יהודי (Yehudi)

Originally, *Yehudi* meant:

- A person **from the tribe of Judah**
- A descendant of **Judah**, son of Jacob (Israel)

Genesis 49 Judah is one of **twelve sons**, not the whole nation.

So in the Torah period:

- **Judah = one tribe**
- **Israel = twelve tribes**

Not all Israelites were Jews
But all Jews were Israelites

This is the original, tribal meaning.

B. Israel vs. Judah

After Solomon, the kingdom split:

Northern Kingdom

- Called **Israel**
- 10 tribes
- Capital: Samaria

Southern Kingdom

- Called **Judah**
- Tribes: Judah, Benjamin, many Levites
- Capital: Jerusalem

From this point on:

- “Israel” and “Judah” are used differently in Scripture
- Prophets often speak to them **separately**

Hosea speaks to **Israel**

Jeremiah speaks largely to **Judah**

C. Esther 2:5 -Why This Verse Is Key

Esther 2:5

“There was a Jew in Shushan... a Benjamite”

This verse proves something critical.

- Mordecai is called a **Jew (Yehudi)**
- But his tribe is **Benjamin**, not Judah

That tells us:

- “Jew” had already begun shifting from a **strict tribal term**
- To a **national / covenant identifier**

The word expanded beyond just Judah **after exile**

D. What Changed After the Babylonian Captivity

Who Returned from Babylon?

- **Judah**
- **Benjamin**
- **Levi**

The **northern tribes had already been scattered** by Assyria (722 BCE).

So when people returned to rebuild:

- They lived in **Judah**
- They preserved **Torah**
- They rebuilt **Jerusalem**
- They kept covenant identity alive

Over time, outsiders began calling them:

- “Jews” (Yehudim)
Because they came from:
- The land of **Judah (Yehud)**

E. How “Jew” Became a National Identifier

After exile, “Jew” slowly came to mean:

- Someone connected to **Judah**
- Someone preserving **Torah**
- Someone identifying with **Jerusalem**
- Someone maintaining covenant practice

It no longer meant only:

- “From the tribe of Judah”

But rather:

- “From the covenant community centered in Judah”

This is a **historical shift**, not a Torah redefinition.

F. What the Torah Still Maintains

Even with the later usage:

- Israel is **still 12 tribes**
- Judah is **still one tribe**
- The northern tribes are **still Israel**
- They are scattered, not erased

Ezekiel 37

- Two sticks:
 - Judah
 - Israel (Ephraim)
- To be reunited later

This means:

- “Jew” does **not** equal “all Israel”
- But Jews are **part of Israel**

Biblically, an Israelite is a member of the covenant people descended from the twelve tribes of Jacob. A Jew originally referred to someone from the tribe of Judah, but after the Babylonian exile the term expanded to describe those who preserved Torah identity in the land of Judah. Not all Israelites are Jews, but all biblical Jews are Israelites.

H. Why This Matters Today

Understanding this:

- Explains why Israelite identity is broader than modern labels
- Explains why many Israelites today do not call themselves Jews
- Explains why Jewish people preserved Scripture
- Prevents erasing **either** group’s role
- Prevents confusion, replacement, or hostility

Torah does not promote division it explains **function and history**.

The Torah never erased Israel in favor of Judah, and it never erased Judah in favor of Israel. It preserved both for a future reunion.

Who Are the People Today Called “Jewish”

First principle

The **Torah**, **Second-Temple history**, and **modern usage** are **not the same system**.

So when people say “Jewish” today, they may be referring to **different things at the same time**:

- lineage
- religion
- nationality
- culture
- law

This is why confusion exists.

A. Ethnic Judeans (Biblical Lineage)

(Torah category)

Who they are

- Descendants of:
 - **Judah**
 - **Benjamin**
 - **Levi**
- These tribes formed the **Southern Kingdom (Judah)**

Why they’re important

- They returned from Babylon (Ezra–Nehemiah)
- They preserved:
 - Torah scrolls
 - Hebrew literacy
 - Temple traditions
- This group became the **core custodians of Scripture**

“Judah still walks with Elohim.” (Hosea 11:12)

Key facts

- Historically **small in number**
- Often persecuted
- Maintained continuity through exile
- **They absolutely still exist today**

This group represents the **biblical root** of what later gets called “Jewish.”

B. Converted Populations (Post-Torah Legal Category)

(Historical & rabbinic category)

This is where **history**, not Torah, adds layers.

1. Idumeans / Edomites (2nd century BCE)

- During the **Hasmonean period**, some Idumeans were:
 - Conquered
 - Circumcised
 - Required to follow Jewish law
- This is recorded by **Josephus**

This was **political incorporation**, not tribal inheritance.

Roman-era Converts

- In the late Second Temple period:
 - Judaism spread in the Roman world
 - Some Gentiles converted voluntarily
- These converts were:
 - Legally Jewish under later law
 - Not tribal Israelites by lineage

Torah distinction still stands:

“By their families, by their fathers’ houses.” (Numbers 1)

Khazar Conversion (8th–10th century CE)

- The **Khazar ruling class** (Central Eurasia) adopted Judaism for:
 - Political neutrality
 - Independence from Christian & Islamic empires
- This is documented in:
 - Byzantine records
 - Arab historians
 - Medieval correspondence

This does **not** mean:

- All Jews are Khazars
- Or that Khazars define Judaism

It means **some Jewish populations include descendants of converts**, like most religions.

European & Diaspora Converts

Over centuries:

- People converted into Judaism
- Families joined communities
- Identity expanded culturally and legally

This is **normal historical development**, not deception.

C. Why This Creates Tension

Here is the core issue stated **clearly and respectfully**:

Torah defines identity by:

- **Tribe**
- **Paternal lineage**
- **Inheritance**

📖 Numbers 1, Ezra 2

Rabbinic Judaism defines Jewishness by:

- **Maternal descent**
- **Legal conversion**
- **Community law**

These are **two different frameworks**.

Neither group invented this tension it developed over time.

D. What This Does *NOT* Mean

This explanation does **not** mean:

- Converts are “fake”
- Jews are illegitimate
- Anyone should be disrespected
- People should be excluded or attacked

Torah commands:

“You shall love the stranger.”

The issue is **categorical clarity**, not judgment.

Today, the term “Jewish” includes multiple historical categories. Biblically, a Jew originally referred to someone from the tribe of Judah, along with Benjamin and Levi after the exile. Over time, Judaism also became a religious and legal identity that included converts from other nations through historical and rabbinic processes. The Torah defines Israelite identity by tribal lineage, while later Jewish law defines Jewishness by maternal descent or conversion. Understanding this distinction helps explain why modern Jewish identity is diverse and why Torah categories and later history do not always align.

Understanding this:

- Prevents hostility
- Prevents oversimplification
- Protects Scripture from misuse
- Honors both Torah and history
- Explains modern diversity honestly

The Torah defines covenant lineage.
History defines communal identity.
Confusing the two creates division understanding both creates clarity.

A. “Israel” in Torah Is a Covenant Nation

In the Torah:

- **Israel** = a people
- Bound by:
 - Covenant
 - Lineage (tribes)
 - Land
 - Torah
- Governed by:
 - Judges
 - Kings
 - Priests
- Functioned as a **nation**, not just a belief system

“You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” (Exodus 19:6)

So biblically:

- Israel is **not a religion**
- It is a **nation under covenant**

B. “Judaism” Emerges After National Collapse

After Rome:

- Jerusalem destroyed (70 CE)
- Temple destroyed
- Priesthood dismantled
- Sacrificial system ended
- National governance ended

Israel could no longer function as:

- A land-based nation
- A Temple-centered system

So survival required **adaptation**.

C. What Survived Was a Religious Framework

In exile, the people of Judah preserved Torah through:

- Synagogues
- Teachers
- Legal interpretation
- Community law

This system became known as **Judaism**.

Important distinction:

- **Judaism = a religious framework**
- **Israel = a covenant nation**

Judaism preserved **practice**, not **nationhood**.

D. Why the Name “Israelite” Faded in Usage

Because:

- Israel no longer existed as a unified nation
- Tribal distinctions blurred in exile
- Land-based identity was lost
- Roman rule suppressed national identity

So identity shifted from:

Bloodline + land + covenant

to

Religion + law + community

That’s why:

- People said “Jewish” (religious)
- Not “Israelite” (national)

This was survival, not deception.

E. Clean Summary of the Distinction

You can state it simply:

“Jewish” describes a religious identity that developed in exile. “Israelite” describes a covenant people defined by lineage, land, and Torah. They overlap, but they are not the same thing.

That statement is accurate and non-hostile.

Why Does Something Feel “Off” Even Though Torah Is Upheld

This is a *real* question and it’s not about hatred or rejection. It’s about **authority, structure, and alignment.**

A. Rabbinic Authority Replaced Torah Authority

After the Temple:

- Rabbis became the interpreters of Torah
- Oral Law (Mishnah, later Talmud) was elevated
- Fence-laws were added to prevent transgression

Deuteronomy 4:2

“You shall not add to the word which I command you...”

For many seekers, the tension comes from:

- Torah filtered through layers of commentary
- Authority shifting from Scripture to scholars

That creates distance for people seeking **direct covenant instruction.**

B. The Name Was Removed from Common Use

Historically:

- The Tetragrammaton stopped being spoken
- Substitutes like **Adonai** were used instead
- Over time, titles replaced the Name entirely

Exodus 3:15

“This is My Name forever.”

For those returning to Torah:

- The absence of the Name feels significant
- It feels like something foundational is missing

That tension is **scriptural**, not emotional.

C. Messianic Expectation Shifted

In the Tanakh:

- Messiah is expected to restore
 - Justice
 - Covenant
 - Unity of Israel

In rabbinic tradition:

- Messiah is reinterpreted
- Delayed
- Or redefined politically or philosophically

This creates:

- A break in prophetic continuity
- Confusion for those reading Tanakh literally

D. Bloodline vs Belief Creates Identity Strain

Here is the core issue:

- **Torah** defines covenant through:
 - Lineage
 - Tribe
 - Inheritance
- **Rabbinic Judaism** defines Jewishness through:
 - Maternal descent
 - Legal conversion
 - Community acceptance

These systems don't perfectly align.

That mismatch is why:

- Some people feel Torah is upheld, yet incomplete
- Others feel identity questions remain unresolved

E. What This Does *Not* Mean

This explanation does **not** mean:

- Judaism is invalid
- Jewish people are wrong
- Converts are illegitimate
- Torah was destroyed

It means:

- **A covenant nation adapted into a religion to survive exile**
- And adaptations always create tension with original design

After the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, Israel ceased to function as a nation and survived through a religious system now called Judaism. While Judaism preserved Torah practice and community, it differs from the original covenant model of Israel, which was defined by lineage, land, and national identity. The tension many feel today arises from shifts in authority, the removal of the divine Name, changes in messianic expectation, and differences between Torah lineage and later religious definitions. Understanding this distinction allows for clarity without hostility and respect without confusion.

Preserving Torah in exile kept the people alive.
Restoring covenant clarity is part of the return.

Are they “fake” or “evil” Why the Answer Is No

The **Tanakh never authorizes hatred of a people** for theological disagreement.

That’s not Torah. That’s something else.

What the Tanakh *does* criticize

Not ethnicity.

Not lineage.

Not converts.

It criticizes **systems, leadership, and heart posture.**

Isaiah 29:13 : What it’s actually saying

“This people draw near with their mouth... but their heart is far from Me.”

This verse is not about genetics.

It’s about **outward practice vs inward alignment.**

Key point:

- You can **do the right actions**
- And still be **out of alignment in authority or intent**

That applies to:

- Ancient Judah
- Modern Judaism
- Christianity
- Any religious system

No group is exempt.

Jeremiah 8:8 : What “lying pen of the scribes” means

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, and the Torah of YAHUAH is with us,’ when the lying pen of the scribes has made it false?”

This is not an attack on *all scribes*.

It is a rebuke of **institutional manipulation of authority**.

It means:

- Torah exists
- But interpretation can be corrupted
- Especially when power, tradition, or control are involved

Again: **systemic issue**, not personal evil.

Why sincerity still isn't enough

This is the hard truth, but it's not cruel:

Sincerity is not equal to covenant accuracy

A person can be:

- Sincere
- Devout
- Disciplined
- Torah-observant

...and still be operating inside a **filtered system**.

That doesn't make them evil.

It means they inherited a structure shaped by exile.

Where Do Scattered Israelites Fit

The Tanakh is extremely clear about this.

Israel would not just be punished

Israel would be **disoriented**.

Hosea 1:9–10

- Called “Not My people”
- Later called “sons of the living Elohim”

This describes:

- Identity loss
- Then identity restoration

Deuteronomy 28

- Loss of name
- Loss of language
- Loss of self-understanding
- Service under other nations
- Confusion, not clarity

This explains why:

- Many Israelites don’t resemble modern “Jewish” culture
- Many feel spiritually displaced
- Many awaken suddenly and painfully

Ezekiel 37 Dry Bones

This is not poetic fluff.

It describes:

- People who are alive
- But don’t know who they are
- Bones reconnecting
- Breath returning
- Identity restored **after** confusion

Awakening feels disruptive because **it reverses generations of forgetting.**

The Clean, Honest Summary

This summary is strong because it's **balanced**:

- **Israelites**
= covenant people by lineage and calling
- **Jews**
= a subset of Israel who preserved Torah through religion
- **Judaism**
= a survival system developed in exile
- **Modern Jewish identity**
= mixed lineage + religion + history
- **Torah truth**
= still intact, but filtered through exile systems

Nothing here says:

- Jews are evil
- Converts are illegitimate
- Torah was lost

It says:

- Exile reshaped structure
- Survival required adaptation
- Adaptation creates misalignment with original design

That's a **historical reality**, not a moral judgment.

Torah was designed for a covenant nation.
Religion was designed for survival in exile.

When a nation returns to consciousness inside a religious structure, **friction happens**.

That friction is not hate.
It's **misalignment**.

Correction is not condemnation.
Clarity is not hatred.
Returning to covenant does not require rejecting people.

The Torah never calls for contempt.
It calls for **truth, humility, and obedience**.