

The People of the Land in Yeshua’s Day

In order to interpret the New Testament accurately, it requires a clear understanding of the use of the Greek word *Ioudaios* (pl. *Ioudaioi*). In most English translations, it is rendered as “Jew.” But it is derived from the Hebrew *Yehudah*, which is translated into English as “Judah.” It is also the basis for the Latin, *Iudaea*, translated as “Judea.”

In our modern understanding, when it comes to the subjects of the New Testament, we tend to think of Jewish people, not the people of the land of Judah/Judea. But in the second temple period, the predominant usage of the Greek term *Ioudaioi* was specifically in reference to the people of the region of Judea.



This map depicts the various regions in the first century A.D. that were once the kingdom of Israel and surrounding lands. The Romans took three of those regions—Judea, Samaria and Idumea—and they organized them into a province that also bore the name of Judea. As a province, that meant it was subject to full Roman rule, administered by a Roman governor.

The region of Galilee, however, was not part of the province of Judea. It was combined with the region of Perea on the eastern side of the Jordan to form a separate, vassal kingdom that was subject to Rome. Thus, it was free to rule itself as long as it didn’t cause problems for Rome.

Galilee-Perea was ruled by Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. He was considered to be a tetrarch, not a full king, but a ruler with substantial authority. So they were able to mint their own coins, but the people had to pay tribute to Rome, which was a form of taxation. Unlike Judea, Galilee-Perea had its own soldiers, and no Roman soldiers were stationed there until the Jewish revolt began in 66 A.D.

Antipas built the primary city of Tiberias on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where he had a palace. He also maintained a palace in Machaerus on the eastern side of the Dead Sea (where he imprisoned and martyred John the Baptist). In addition, while not having authority over Judea, Antipas regularly spent time there by attending major events in Jerusalem, like Passover. This explains why he was present at the time of Yeshua’s crucifixion, and why the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, sent Yeshua, who was a Galilean, to Antipas before rendering his decision.

These distinctions have an impact on how we should understand the use of the Greek term *Ioudaios* in the New Testament. Throughout the four gospels, Yeshua is never identified using that term, except when Pilate ordered a sign to be placed on the cross, calling Yeshua, “King of the Jews” (Jn 19:19). In other words, at no time is Yeshua directly described by His fellow kinsmen as being *Ioudaios*, meaning “Jew” or “Judean.” He is invariably described as being a Galilean (Mat 26:69) or more specifically, from Nazareth of Galilee (Mat 21:11; Mk 1:9; Lk 2:39).

This does not mean whatsoever that Yeshua was not ethnically Jewish. He was born to a

Jewish mother, who, along with His step-father Joseph, were descendants of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Judah, whose Hebrew name *Yehudah* is the basis for the term, “Jew.” Moreover, in reference to the Jewish people, John 1:11 tells us that “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” And, when speaking to a Samaritan woman, Yeshua said, “You [Gentiles] worship what you do not know; we [Jews] know what we [Jews] worship, for salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22). These facts, and many more, make it clear that Yeshua was Jewish in every way and that is not in dispute in the New Testament. But in the gospels, He is always identified using the term Galilee, not Judea, as a reference to the region where He lived.

So when we come to the use of *Ioudaioi* in the same gospels, the same principle of a regional, rather than ethnic, identifier should be used. That is why English Bibles like the New Jerusalem Version translate *Ioudaioi* as “Judeans” instead of “Jews.” That rendering is consistent with the way that the local people of the second temple period spoke. After all, it would make no sense to say that “Jews came” to a place when all of the people present were Jews. But it would be helpful to know which region the people came from. The word Judeans accomplishes that purpose. The only exception would be when the context of a passage specifically addresses the Jewish people as a whole, regardless of where they come from.

How the use of the Greek Definite Article Adds to our Understanding

In Koine Greek, the language of the New Testament, the definite article (“the”) is used somewhat differently than in English. In both Greek and English, the definite article is like a gesture pointing to something in order to distinguish it from everything else. That is what makes it “definite.” In English, we don’t normally use the definite article when it comes to names. For example, you wouldn’t refer to me as “the Galen.” However, Greek does that consistently when it comes to the names of New Testament characters, including Yeshua, where the text literally reads “*ho Iesous*—the Yeshua.” But, since in English we don’t speak that way, the definite article is dropped in translations. We just say “Yeshua.” The same is true for *Theos*, the Greek word for God. It, too, has the definite article attached to it in Greek, but we don’t use it in English translations.

This nuance informs the way that we understand passages where the term *hoi Ioudaioi* is employed by the authors. Many English versions ignore the rule regarding dropping the definite article when converting Greek into English by rendering it as “the Jews.” That is inconsistent with the way that they render other names, like *ho Iesous* as “Jesus” and *ho Theos* as “God.” Thus, the simplified rendering of “Judeans,” not “the Jews,” for *hoi Ioudaioi* is a more accurate translation into English according to this rule of Greek grammar.

Why is this relevant? Some people say that the New Testament is an anti-Semitic book. It is true that the phrase “the Jews” has been used by those who hate Jews as being so-called evidence of the evil inherent in all Jewish people. But, as we have seen, that supposed evidence is based on a false understanding of Greek grammar. The power of the definite article cannot be underestimated, for in English, it can imply total inclusivity. But in Greek, that is not the case. It just points to the identity of the immediate subject, in distinction from others.

For all of these reasons, when *hoi Ioudaioi* is used in the New Testament, we should envision a limited group of Judeans, not “the Jews” of the nation or typological representatives of all Jewish people of every generation, as some have falsely concluded.