

The Doctrine of the Name Hebrew

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall be have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God.” (John 3:16–18). “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!” (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

We have three doctrines of the name Hebrew. Each is about 2 pages long.

The Meaning and Usage of the word *Hebrew*

The Term *Hebrew*

The Term *Hebrews*

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Preface: Briefly, the name *Hebrew* is how other nations referred to the Israelites (Ex. 1:15 2:6).

1. In the Hebrew, the word Hebrew is 'Ib^orîy (יִרְבֵּעַ) [pronounced *gî^{be}-VREE*], which is poorly transliterated as *Hebrew*. This word, interestingly enough, is found most often in the books of Genesis, Exodus and 1Samuel. Apart from those books, we find it once in Deuteronomy, thrice in Jeremiah and once in Jonah. We first find this mentioned back in Gen. 14:13 in reference to Abraham, when we discussed it in more detail. Strong's #5680 BDB #720. There are two suggested origins for the word *Hebrew*.
 - a. One possibility is that Abraham had an ancestor named Eber. In the Hebrew, that is 'Éber (עֵבֶר) [pronounced *GAY^b-ver*], which means, *one from beyond, the other side, across, region on the other side*; and is transliterated *Eber, Heber, Hebrew, Eberite*. Strong's #5677 BDB #720. There appear to be times in the Bible when a person of a specific name actually has that name changed somewhat, to reflect information about that person.
 - b. The other possibility is that the name comes from the verb 'ābar (עָבַר) [pronounced *gaw^b-VAHR*], which means *to pass over, to pass through, to pass, to go over*. Strong's #5674 BDB #716. The idea is that Abraham crossed over the Euphrates River to disassociate himself with his heathen roots.
2. Today, we obviously use the names *Israel, Israelite* and *Hebrew* synonymously. However, historically, the name *Hebrew* was first applied to Abraham 500 years prior to the establishment of the nation Israel.
3. Suggested hypothesis: *Hebrew* is a word used by Israel to designate themselves before foreigners (Ex. 2:6–7, 13 3:18 5:3) and it is a name used by non-Israelites to refer to the Israelites (1Sam. 4:6). In other words, this is a term which separates the Israelites from non-Israelites and is not generally used apart from making such a distinction.¹ However, we find this word used in 1Sam. 13:7 which does not denote such a distinction.
4. In Gen. 14, the chapter of the war of the kings, when the four kings took Lot as a prisoner (he was thought to be a Sodomite because his close proximity to these people), one escaped and came and told Abraham, the *Hebrew* what had happened. This narrative is probably written by (or recounted by) Abraham who is

¹ This was suggested by Gnana Robinson, *1 & 2 Samuel; Let Us Be Like the Nations*; International Theological Commentary; Eerdmans's Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, ©1993; p. 32. This commentary is not known for having accurate information.

- wandering the land. The man who told Abraham may have thought of him as a foreigner, inasmuch as he was unrelated to the war between the nine kings (Gen. 14:13).
5. In Gen. 39:14, 17, the word is used in what appears to be a derogatory way. Joseph has resisted this woman of Potipher's many times, so that she becomes frustrated and accuses him of rape.
 6. Joseph uses this word when describing himself while explaining his situation to the chief cupbearer in Gen. 40:15. Since there were only a bit more than a few dozen Jews in the world at that time, so that the terms Jew and Hebrew were not yet synonymous. The term Hebrew was applied to Joseph by his accuser (a term he no doubt heard prior to the accusation and during his sentencing because of her accusation), so Joseph applies it to himself. Here, in Egypt, it likely refers to those from Canaan or those from beyond the land of Egypt. When the chief cupbearer remembers, he uses this term (Gen. 41:12).
 7. Hebrew is used in connection with racial prejudice in Gen. 43:32. Joseph ate alone, his brothers ate at another table, and the Egyptians ate at another table because Egyptians did not eat with Hebrews. Even at that time, they were seen as outsiders.
 8. This name had become fully associated with Jews during the period of slavery to the Egyptians between Genesis and Exodus (Ex. 1:15, 16, 19 2:6, 7, 11, 13).
 9. God uses this term to apply to the Jews in Ex. 3:18 Deut. 15:12 (see also Ex. 5:3 7:16 9:1, 13 10:3 21:2). Note that these uses were always applied to the Jew when they were in a foreign land (in Gen. 14:13, they were still considered sojourners in a foreign land, even though they were in the land of Canaan).
 10. It is significant that this word is not found in Joshua, Judges, Ruth Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, or Isaiah.
 11. The Jews became fully associated with the term *Hebrew* by the time of Samuel; that is, the terms were interchangeable (1Sam. 4:6, 9 13:19 14:11, 21 29:3 Jer. 34:9, 14)
 12. The Jews applied this term to themselves (1Sam. 13:3, 7)
 13. The Hebrews were also closely associated in the minds of foreigners with Yahweh Elohim (Jonah 1:9)

The doctrine is found in Lesson #8 of the **Exodus Study** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

This approach may be more detailed than you might want. However, there is less known about this term than you might suspect. However, there are two basic approaches to the meaning and origin of this word.

The ESV; capitalized is used below:

The Term *Hebrew*

1. Many believe that the term *Hebrew* originally referred to people from outside the land of Canaan because we read in Gen. 14:13a **Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite.** Abraham came from the east (the area that we know today as Iraq and possibly modern Syria—from the eastern portion of modern Syria). He crossed over the Jordan River, entering Canaan. It is possible that *Hebrew* in this verse is a gloss (that is, added later).
2. Shem, the father of the Semitic peoples and Semitic language, is also said to be **the father of all the children of Eber** (Gen. 10:21b). Eber is the great grandson of Shem (Gen. 10:21–23 11:11–14).
3. There are two Hebrew words pertinent to this:
 - 1) 'Ēber (עִבְרִי) [pronounced *ĠAY^B-ver*], which means, *one from beyond, the other side, across, region on the other side*; and is transliterated *Eber, Heber, Hebrew, Eberite*. This is the proper noun found in Gen. 10:21. Strong's #5677 BDB #720.
 - 2) 'Ib^erîy (יִבְרִי) [pronounced *ġih^b-VREE*], which means, *one from beyond*; transliterated *Hebrew, Eberite*. This is a proper masculine singular gentilic/noun. Strong's #5680 BDB #720. Every time you see the words *Hebrew* (or *Hebrews*) in the Bible, this is the word that is being translated (almost transliterated).
 - 3) 'Ib^erîy is the gentilic form of 'Ēber, meaning that 'Ib^erîy is a general singular form designation for the people of Eber. The masculine plural form is 'Ib^erîym (יִבְרִיִּם) [pronounced *ġih^b-VREEM*].
4. Now, we do not find the word *Hebrew* used anywhere else to describe Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while they are in Canaan. This suggests that the word *the Hebrew*¹ may be a gloss in Gen. 14:13 (added in at

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- a later time). However, if 'Ib^orîy (יִרְבֵּעַ) [pronounced *gih^b-VREE*] does correctly refer to a descendant of Eber, then it would have been properly applied to Abraham.
5. Abraham is clearly descended from Shem through Eber. Gen. 11:11–26. Furthermore, men are known by their ancestors (I am a *Kukis*, which is my surname; that name goes back many, many generations). There is a very important difference. The original *Kukis* is long dead and gone; but Eber (and almost all of Abraham’s ancestors) was probably still alive during the time of Abraham (see Ages of Patriarchs [chart](#)).
 6. Therefore, it is not difficult to connect the dots and suggest that Abraham was known as a *son of Eber*; an *Eberite*; which designation takes in a fairly large group of people. Today, we only apply the word *Hebrew* to those born from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; but then, that word would have had a much wider application.
 7. The next use of the term *Hebrew* in the Bible occurs in Egypt, possibly to refer to those coming down from Canaan (see Gen. 39:14, 17 41:12). It possibly meant *stranger, foreigner*; and was only applied to the sons of Israel as a general term that applied to them and to others.
 8. In Gen. 39:14, the wife of Joseph’s master says, “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.” This is a quotation, suggesting that this woman used the term to refer to slaves coming from Canaan.²
 9. The other two references to Joseph being a *Hebrew* from the book of Genesis are quotations as well. The people speaking of Joseph as a *Hebrew* were Egyptians and they would not have come up with a racial term to describe Joseph or members of his family *only* (they would not have known anything about Joseph’s family).
 10. The word *Hebrew* is used in the context of one Egyptian speaking to another Egyptian, further indicating that this is an Egyptian way of referring to men of Canaan (the term did not have to originate with the Egyptians to be used by the Egyptians).
 11. Therefore, we have a problem here: did this have a more specific application to those descended from Eber or did it refer to those slaves who came from Canaan? Were there physical characteristics which differentiated between the people of Canaan and the people from the east? Quite frankly, we do not know; but the etymology suggests a connection to Eber, despite the lack of references in Gen. 14–38. Furthermore, the Egyptians were an educated people in one of the most powerful nations of that era—so they may have developed a sophisticated set of racial designations regarding slaves and/or immigrants, possibly even based upon the languages of the people themselves (that is, they may have used the language of the people to specifically name them).
 12. Furthermore, recall that God confused the languages (Gen. 10), and then the people were forced to separate themselves and to move apart from one another. Based upon our studies of Genesis, people would have tended to be far more racially pure than what we have today. My point being, it is very possible that people who had come from the east had easily identifiable racial characteristics which may have clearly differentiated them from the Canaanites.
 13. Therefore, this word *Hebrew* could be a term applied to specific Semites³ who came from the Babylonian area (specifically, the sons of Eber)—this would make sense, given the meaning of the word *Hebrew*; but this word is not actually clearly used in this way until Joseph is in Egypt.
 14. However, at some point, likely during their time in Egypt, this word *Hebrew* became a defining term for the sons of Israel; to where they became synonymous with the title/designation Hebrew.
 15. In the book of Exodus and forward, *Hebrew* is applied to the descendants of Jacob (and, of course, to all those who marry into the family).

¹ We see this as two words; the Hebrew language sees *the Hebrew* as a single word.

² Jacob’s family was so small at this time; so the Egyptians would not have had a special term just for them. This woman would have known nothing about the origins of Joseph and his family. However, there may have been obvious racial characteristics which distinguished him. Today, racial purity is virtually non-existent. If you could have a group of American (or European Jews) and stand them next to a group of Jews from the year A.D. 1, the two groups would look dramatically different.

³ Recall that a Semite is someone who is descended from Shem.

The term *Jew* (or, *Jews*) is a very late term applied to the people of Israel. We do not find it until 2Kings 25:25. This seems to be applied when the Chaldeans were going to overrun the people of God and force them out of their land (in the northern kingdom). It is related to the tribe of Judah, which became, at some point, the only known tribe of Israel, apart from the Levites (descendants from the other tribes exist and some Jewish people today believe that they belong to these other tribes; but only God knows who belongs to which tribe for certain).

The doctrine is found in Lesson #44 of the **Exodus Study** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

God has already been called *God of the Hebrews* (Exodus 3:18), a title which is, interestingly enough, found only in the book of Exodus (Exodus 3:18 5:3 7:16 9:1, 13 10:3).

The Term *Hebrews*

1. The word *Hebrew*, which is found throughout Old Testament (but less often than you might think), is 'Ib^erîym (מִיִּבְרִי) [pronounced *gih^b-VREEM*], which means, *those from beyond*. It is transliterated *Hebrews*, *Eberites*. Strong's #5680 BDB #720.
2. This appears to be originally an Egyptian designation for those who came from Canaan (it is not clear if it has been altered in any way by the Hebrew language).
3. Egyptians appear to have given this name to the sons of Jacob, which was previously a generic term applied to people who simply came from outside of Egypt. Apparently, this term was commonly applied to those who came from Canaan (or possibly anyone who came from that general direction). Gen. 40:15
4. It is so used in Gen. 43:32 when it is noted that there was a custom against Egyptians eating with Hebrews (the ESV reads: *They served him [Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt] by himself, and them [the sons of Jacob] by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.*) Clearly, there would have been no specific custom against eating with the sons of Jacob at this time, as they were a very small tribe of people, who were about 70 in number—wives and children included—and unknown to all Egyptians at the time of Joseph's rise to power in Egypt. Therefore, the custom of not eating with *Hebrews* is either a specific reference to the people of Canaan or a reference to non-Egyptians in general. My general impression of Egyptians at this time is, they are fastidiously clean people.
5. By the time of the exodus, this word became a term which specifically referenced the descendants of Jacob who lived in Egypt (Exodus 1:22 2:6, 13). That was simply how they were referred to. It is even possible that this word was a term of derision applied to them by their Egyptian masters (which is why I suggested that perhaps this term was softened, changed, or Hebrewized by the Hebrew people).
6. In any case, both the sons of Israel and the Egyptians accepted this terminology, and the sons of Israel were therefore known as *Hebrews*.
7. This term is used in the book of Exodus with reference to their God, Who is called *Elohim of the Hebrews* in Exodus 3:18 5:3 7:16 9:1, 13 10:3. Given the relative status of the Hebrew people, this was a powerful designation. No matter how the people of Egypt views the Hebrews, they have a powerful God Who would prove to be all-powerful.
8. The Philistines used this term *Hebrew* to refer to the Israelite people. 1Sam. 4:6, 9 13:19 14:11 29:3
9. King Saul used this term to refer to his people. 1Sam. 13:3
10. Therefore, this word became a common way to reference the sons of Jacob.
11. This term is used by the writer of Samuel in 1Sam. 13:7 as a parallel term to *men of Israel*. The phrase *men of Israel* generally refers to the *army of Israel* and it was a much more common term than *Hebrews*. The word *Hebrew* (*s*) is only found 34 times in the OT¹; and *men of Israel* is found nearly 60 times in the OT.²

So, it appears that this term was originally a generic term used by the Egyptians to refer to people from outside of Egypt; and that this was, in time, was specifically applied to the sons of Jacob and appropriated by them as well.

¹ *Hebrew* (s) is only found 15 times in the NT.

² I should clarify that I took these numbers from the English of the KJV. The Orthodox Jewish Bible has the phrase *Bnei Yisrael* (*sons of Israel*) and it is found 640 times in the OT. In case you were wondering, their word for *Hebrew* (*Ivrim*) is found about the same number of times that *Hebrew* is found in the KJV.