

# FAQ VOL II

A WORK IN PROGRESS

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# Frequently Asked Questions

VOLUME II

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# B'nei Yisrael

## Does the Hebrew *b'nei Yisrael* mean “sons of Israel” or “children of Israel”?

*a Messianic Apologetics episode, 08 November, 2021*

When you read the Hebrew Tanach (OT) and you encounter the terminology *b'nei Yisrael*, what does it mean does it mean?<sup>1</sup> Some think that it means “sons of Israel,” or only ethnic male Israelites. Does it, perhaps, mean “children of Israel,” which for certain would mean both ethnic male and female Israelites? When you look at a number of today's English Bible versions, just do a brief survey, and you will see that there is no agreement on how the terminology *b'nei Yisrael* should be translated.

The **New American Standard** family, which in my experience tends to be the most widely used and employed evangelical Protestant version in today's Messianic community—whether it is the original 1977 edition (NASB), the 1995 New American Standard Update (NASU), and the newly released 2020 New American Standard Bible (2020 NASB)—renders *b'nei Yisrael* as “sons of Israel.”

The 1996 **ArtScroll Tanach** (ATS), an Orthodox Jewish version, renders *b'nei Yisrael* as “Children of Israel.” The **New International Version** (NIV), originally released in 1984, renders *b'nei Yisrael* as simply “Israelites,” and this is also followed by other versions, notably the **New Jewish Publication Society** version (NJPS), which also receives some circulation in the Messianic world. The **English Standard Version** (ESV), originally released in 2001, actually renders *b'nei Yisrael* as “people of Israel,” although anyone who has studied Hebrew would know that that is more correctly *am Yisrael*.

The **Tree of Life Version** (TLV), which I would say by now (almost the year 2022)—you probably have a copy of if you are in the Messianic world—is a product of over two dozen scholars, as well as Messianic ministries and organizations of long-standing. What do they have for *b'nei Yisrael*? They simply transliterate *b'nei Yisrael* as “*Bnei-Yisrael*” in the text, not making a value judgment on whether it is “sons of Israel” or “children of Israel.” That indicates how internally, in much of the Messianic community, people do not know what to do about it. So in the case of the TLV, they were just going to leave it as “*Bnei-Yisrael*.”

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<sup>1</sup> This has been adapted and edited from the textual transcription provided by YouTube.

Along with that, in 2018, John Goldingay, an Old Testament theologian—who does sit to the slight Left of Center—released a specialty version called **The First Testament**.<sup>2</sup> And he has “Yisra’elites,” not just Israelites—but Yisra’elites, trying to offer a transliteration consistent with the Hebrew.

So that just gives you a small snapshot of how the terminology *b’nei Yisrael* is used. There is no agreement among English versions on how it should be rendered.

Now, for the interpreter or the student of the Bible—who is possibly looking through an interlinear or parallel edition of the Hebrew—and sees *b’nei Yisrael* used, it should be clear enough to note all the ways it can be translated. You have to look at things on a passage-by-passage or issue-by-issue basis. This is because most Jewish and Christian interpreters today who approach the terminology *b’nei Yisrael*, would approach it from the perspective of it including very much ethnic male and female Israelites, unless otherwise stated in a passage or in a text. So when you approach a passage where *b’nei Yisrael* is employed, most of today’s Jewish and Christian examiners—and I would also have to say most people in the Messianic community—conclude that ethnic male and female Israelites were being spoken of, unless otherwise stated.

Now from time to time in today’s independent Hebrew or Hebraic Roots movement out there, you are going to encounter people who would say that *b’nei Yisrael* means “sons of Israel.” This means that *b’nei Yisrael* only concerns ethnic male Israelites, and is usually associated with some kind of rigid patriarchy. Ironically enough, though, there are also people in the independent Hebrew or Hebraic Roots movement, who are perhaps a little further down the road, in some cases, than a number of people in Messianic Judaism. They may actually believe in an egalitarian ideology, and conclude that *b’nei Yisrael* definitely speaks of both male and female ethnic Israelites—and is egalitarian—unless otherwise stated. *B’nei Yisrael* as “children of Israel” would be male and female Israelites.

One of the things which does get raised, from time to time in theology—in technical commentaries and various issue-by-issue matters—involves whether or not *b’nei Yisrael* includes anyone else in the community of Ancient Israel. When you read a passage which has *b’nei Yisrael* or “children of Israel,” everyone agrees that unless otherwise stated, it would involve both ethnic male and female Israelites. But the question has certainly been raised, if it also includes outside sojourners or *gerim* who had entered into the community of Israel, recognized Israel’s One God and, made a commitment to follow the One God of Israel. And so, from time to time, this comes up. It is something, which for some people in the Messianic community, might be a little uncomfortable, because people can take it in a direction of replacement theology. *What does it matter whether one is an ethnic descendant of Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob or not?*

When we look at scenes in the Torah where the community of Israel, the *b’nei Yisrael*, are being spoken to, for example—Moses is speaking to the people, with God commanding him

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<sup>2</sup> John Goldingay, trans., *The First Testament: A New Translation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

to speak to the *b'nei Yisrael*, the “children of Israel”—was God only commanding Moses to speak to ethnic male and female Israelites, **or** everyone in the audience? This is something which has been addressed in the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, and its entry for “Israelites.” (This is a resource I have had since my seminary days.) R.J.D. Knauth has this to say:

“It should be noted that within the laws placed at Mount Sinai, beyond the general designation of the collective congregation of the ‘children [sons] of Israel,’ a distinction is regularly made between the ethnic Israelite (brother, native, Hebrew, etc.) and the ethnic ‘alien’ living within the congregation or envisioned as later living within the land of Israel” (*Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*).<sup>3</sup>

So the Hebrew terminology *b'nei Yisrael* can indeed speak of the collective congregation or broad community. But of course, as this article also noted, there are distinctions regularly indicated between native between outside sojourner who had come in. Much of how we as Bible readers responsibly approach *b'nei Yisrael*, will require us to look at things on a case case-by-case basis. We cannot speak universally one way or the other, whether *b'nei Yisrael* exclusively involves ethnic native Israelites, and/or various sojourners within the community.

Now when I read the Torah or Pentateuch, and I see *b'nei Yisrael* with Moses addressing the “congregation of the *b'nei Yisrael*/the children of Israel,” we have to assume that unless otherwise stated: those are all of the human beings which composed the community of Israel. This would have included ethnic male Israelites, ethnic female Israelites, and sojourners who acknowledged the One God of Israel and had come into the community. At the same time, you may also encounter a passage which speaks of “the *b'nei Yisrael* and the sojourners among them,” with a distinction of some kind intended. So, Bible readers need to pay attention.

To this you may see something speaking of how on the eighth day, the sons of Israel (*b'nei Yisrael*) will be circumcised (Leviticus 12:1-3); contextually, that has to only be speaking of ethnic male Israelites. And you may encounter things which speak of the sons of Israel (*b'nei Yisrael*) and the daughters of Israel (*batot Yisrael*). You have to deal with these matters on a case-by-case and issue-by-issue basis. This is not easy for some people, particularly the older generation, which still might—deep in their heart, as complementarians—think that *b'nei Yisrael* really means “sons of Israel.” The only reason, for them, females might be included, would be because they are part of some kind of a patriarchal family structure. More naturally, though, today, *b'nei Yisrael* is taken by interpreters to mean ethnic male and female Israelites. And, the point raised by the *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* article, is that while there are many differentiations between native and sojourner in Israel—indeed, when the

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<sup>3</sup> R.J.D. Knauth, “Israelites,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 453.

broad community of Israel as *b'nei Yisrael* is spoken of, if there not distinctions immediately or somewhere recognized, it was speaking of all the human beings in the population.

I think if we can start paying attention to these kinds of details, our reading of the Holy Scriptures will not be fraught with as many tensions as they can be at times. But as we all should be aware, in the world of theology, when one question is answered or resolved—*then, of course, we have a dozen more questions to be addressed!*