

Who were the Galileans in the Bible?

A Galilean in the Bible is an inhabitant of the area in Israel near the Sea of Galilee. In the time of Christ, Galilee was the northernmost of the three provinces of Israel, above Samaria in the middle and Judea in the south. Approximately 700 years before Christ, Galilee's Israelite inhabitants were conquered by Assyria. Most of the Jews living there were relocated to Assyria, while non-Jewish immigrants moved into Galilee (2 Kings 15:29-17:24). This is why the Bible sometimes refers to the area as "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 9:1; Matthew 4:13-16).

Judeans tended to look down on Galileans, viewing them as uneducated and of questionable ancestry (John 1:46; 7:52). Galileans also had a reputation of being rabble-rousers, as they often took part in protests and uprisings against the Roman occupiers. It is significant that Jesus grew up in Galilee (Matthew 2:19-23) and in Galilee recruited most of His disciples, started His ministry, and performed His first miracles (Matthew 4:17-23; John 2:11). Being Galilean, Jesus "was despised, and we held him in low esteem" (Isaiah 53:3).

We see glimpses in Scripture of how Galilee may have been a trouble spot for Roman rule. Gamaliel mentioned a failed revolt led by "Judas the Galilean" in Acts 5:37. In Luke 13:1-3, some people told Jesus about an incident involving Galileans: "Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices" (verse 1). Neither Scripture nor secular history gives any more details regarding this massacre, but it is likely that the Galileans, visiting Jerusalem to offer sacrifices, had been caught up in a nationalistic fervor and started a commotion on the temple mount. The Roman governor Pilate quickly and violently quelled the disturbance, killing the Galileans along with their sacrificial animals, perhaps as

a public demonstration of how violators must “atone” for their “sins” against Rome.

Jesus responded to hearing about the massacre of the Galileans with a warning: “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish” (Luke 13:2-3). Instead of conjecturing on the Galileans’ sin, Jesus said, take care of your own sin. Everyone needs to repent.

Peter, being a Galilean, spoke in a northern Aramaic dialect, and his accent and vocabulary gave him away when he was trying to remain anonymous on the night of Jesus’ arrest. As Peter was sitting in a courtyard during one of Jesus’ trials, a servant girl came up to him and said, “You also were with Jesus of Galilee” (Matthew 26:69). Later, another servant girl said, “This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth” (verse 71). A short time later, others said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away” (verse 73). Galileans naturally stood out to the people of Jerusalem.

The fact that Jesus lived and ministered in Galilee is yet another example of His identification with those the world rejects. He came to seek and to save the lost, both during His time on earth and still today. Those who follow His example will likewise proclaim His message and live out His teachings among culture’s outcasts and minister to “the least of these” (Matthew 25:40).