

What is the significance of Judea in the Bible?

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Judea means “land of the Jews.” The territory of Judea, formerly called Judah, began to be referred to as “Judea” only after the Babylonian captivity. Most of the Jews who returned from exile were from the tribe of Judah. Since the territory of Judah was nearly all that remained of the northern and southern kingdoms at the time of the exile, the returning captives were called “Judeans,” and their homeland became known as Judea.

The name Judea is first introduced in the Bible in the book of Ezra as a province of the Persian Empire: “Be it known unto the king, that we went into the province of Judea, to the house of the great God, which is builded with great stones, and timber is laid in the walls, and this work goeth fast on, and prospereth in their hands” (Ezra 5:8, KJV; see also Ezra 9:9).

Ancient Israel was divided into three main regions: Galilee to the north, Samaria in the center, and Judah, later called Judea, to the south. The province of Judea, as distinguished from Galilee and Samaria, included the territories of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Dan, Simeon, and part of Ephraim. This area, known as the upper hill country, extended from Bethel in the north to Beth Zur in the south, and from Emmaus in the west to the Jordan River in the east.

After the period of exile in Babylon, Judea proper comprised a relatively small region immediately surrounding the city of Jerusalem, an area much reduced from the former kingdom of Judah. However, at times in the Bible, Judea is applied in a broader political sense to mean all the territory occupied by the Jewish nation (Matthew 19:1; Luke 1:5; 4:44; 7:17; 23:5; Acts 10:37; 11:1, 29; 26:20).

Under the Roman Empire, Judea was part of the province of Syria. When Jesus was born, Herod the Great was King of Judea (Luke 1:5), although he ruled a much larger area. After Herod's death and throughout Jesus' lifetime, Judea was under the rule of Roman-appointed procurators, or governors. Among these was Pontius Pilate, who governed at the time of Jesus' death. During the days of the early church, Herod Agrippa I ruled over Judea.

Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea (Matthew 2:1, 5, 6) as foretold by the prophet (Micah 5:2). John the Baptist began his preaching ministry in the wilderness of Judea (Matthew 3:1). Jesus frequently ministered in Judea (John 4:3; 11:7; Mark 10:1), and people from Judea came to hear the Lord's teachings and witness His miracles (Luke 5:17). Even though Jesus encountered difficulties and persecution in Judea (John 4:1-3), He commissioned His disciples to go and be witnesses in "Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Judea was among the nations represented at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:5-11). The apostle Paul also preached in Judea (Acts 26:20), where many Christian churches were established (Acts 9:31; 1 Thessalonians 2:14).