

WHAT THE WORD “HEBREW” MEANS

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Abram was called “Abraham the Hebrew” in Genesis 14:13, which is the first time that the word is used in the Bible. Where did this term come from, and what does it mean?

The word “Hebrew” in the Hebrew language is עברי (Ivrie). The root letters are used to mean cross over, or pass through. Today in Israel, we can use the word to talk about moving houses, transgressing laws, going through some difficulties, crossing the road, crossing over a river, and so on. Traversing, passing, or crossing over, essentially. In the Bible, it seems to have primarily referred to those who traversed rivers. The symbolic meaning of this should not be lost on us who love the Word of God!

It is speculated that Abraham earned the name “Ivrie”, or “One that has traversed” to be referring to the fact that he came from the other side of the river. He and his family had traveled from close to the river Euphrates, crossed over into Haran, and then God called him back over the river again to the land which we now know to be Israel. He also had an ancestor with that name עבר (- Eber, Gen. 11:14) which might explain the link, but either way, the association between these Hebrews (עברים – Ivrim, plural) and the crossing of rivers appears a few times in the Bible.

Joshua gives us this account of events and a clue to how the descendants of Jacob/Israel became known as Hebrews – Ivrim – those who had traversed:

*“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived **beyond the Euphrates**, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from **beyond the River** and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many... “Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and **you came to the sea**. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea... Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on **the other side of the Jordan**. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand... “Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served **beyond the River** and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region **beyond the River**, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (verses from Joshua 24:3-15)*

As you can see, there are several mentions of watery crossings – Abraham coming from beyond the River Euphrates, the dramatic Red Sea crossing of the Exodus, and then the entry into the Promised Land as they crossed over the River Jordan. These Hebrews, these Ivrim, have sure done a fair amount of traversing! You can see why the Egyptians might have called them Hebrews – ones who came from beyond the river – and why Abraham was the ultimate Hebrew. As if to emphasize the point, the Hebrews went through not one but two rather miraculous water crossings; the first and most famous one being the parting of the Red Sea, but also when they finally reached their destination, the Jordan River piled up on either side as the priests set foot on the river bed, and the Hebrews crossed over on dry ground into their inheritance in the Promised Land.

But what is wonderful about this passage in Joshua is that it lines up the idea of leaving behind a life of idol worship and crossing over into worshipping the One True God of Israel.

“Put away the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River... as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”.

For Joshua the symbolism was clear: on one side of the river is idol worship, but we have left that life behind when we crossed over to the other side. Now we will serve the Lord.

The astute will notice that just as the blood of the Passover Lamb preceded going through the waters of the Red Sea, just as the blood sacrifice is offered on the altar outside the tabernacle before the priests come towards the Holy Place and wash themselves with the water of the giant laver, blood and water feature in our salvation in the same order: the blood of Yeshua and the water of baptism. When we come through the waters of baptism, we publicly declare that we are leaving our old lives behind, beyond the river, and are crossing over into a new life of serving God alone.

Hundreds if not thousands of believers come from all over the world to be baptized in the River Jordan, but each one of us who has received forgiveness, thanks to the blood of the Messiah, has crossed over from death to life – from darkness to light. We have left our old life “beyond the river” and gone through the other side, into a whole new life.

We can intentionally put away the ‘gods’ that we used to serve – whether it was money, attention, success, validation, distraction... leaving all these ‘gods’ behind in the region beyond the River that we passed through, from death to eternal life. We have joined the Ivrim who have crossed over! Let’s declare with Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord”.