

The Lost Tribes of Israel

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There is a popular, almost universal, idea that at the time of the Babylonian captivity, ten of the twelve tribes were wholly lost, and that only two tribes could be mustered to return to the land of Palestine at the close of the seventy years.

So deeply rooted is this notion, that almost everybody knows at once what is referred to whenever the expression, “the ten lost tribes,” is used. How this idea came to prevail, we shall not now stop to enquire, but shall content ourselves with ascertaining what the Bible has to say upon the subject of the lost Israelites.

Judah and Israel

First, however, it may be well to note a common misconception concerning the terms “Judah” and “Israel.” When the kingdom was divided, after the death of Solomon:

- the southern portion, consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, was known as the kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital; while
- the northern portion, consisting of the remaining tribes, was known as the kingdom of Israel, with headquarters at Samaria.

This northern kingdom it was that was first carried captive, and the tribes that composed it are the ones supposed to be lost.

“Jew” and “Israelite” the same

The misconception is that the term “Jews” is limited to the people of the southern kingdom, namely, to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, and that the term “Israelites” signifies only those tribes composing the northern kingdom, supposed to be lost.

Going on in the line of this supposition, “the warm, un-governed imagination” of some speculative theologians has fancied that the people generally known as Jews are from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin alone, and that the Anglo-Saxon race, or more specifically, the people of Great Britain and America, are the Israelites, or, in other words, “ten lost tribes” discovered.

Character, not Nationality

It is easy to see how this theory originated. It originated in an utter failure to comprehend the promises of the Gospel. It was invented in order to bring in the Anglo-Saxon race as inheritors of the promises to Abraham, the fact having been lost sight of that those promises embraced the whole world, without respect to nationality, and that

Acts 10

³⁴ God is no respecter of persons,

³⁵ But in every nation he that fears Him and works righteousness, is accepted with Him.

If men had believed that “an Israelite indeed,” is one “in whom is no guile,” (*John 1:47*) they would have seen the folly of the idea that no matter how wicked and unbelieving people may be, they must be Israelites simply because they are a part of a certain nation.

But the idea of a national church and of a national religion is wonderfully fascinating, because it is so much more pleasant for people to suppose that they are to be saved in bulk, regardless of character, instead of through individual faith and righteousness.

Scripture Use of the Terms

A few texts of Scripture are sufficient to show that the terms “Jew” and “Israelite” are used interchangeably, each being applicable to the same person. For instance:

Esther 2

⁵ In Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

But in *Romans 11*, I we have the Apostle Paul's statement:

Romans 11

¹ ...I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.

And the same Apostle said:

Acts 21

³⁹ I am a man which am a Jew of Tarsus.

Here we have one man of the tribe of Benjamin, a Jew, and another man of the same tribe, an Israelite, and at the same time a Jew.

Again, Ahaz was one of the kings of Judah, and reigned in Jerusalem. See *2 Kings 16:1-2*; *Isaiah 1:1*. He was a descendant of David, and one of the ancestors of Jesus according to the flesh. *2 Kings 16:2*; *Matthew 1:9*.

Yet in *2 Chronicles 28:19*, in an account of the invasion of "the south of Judah" by the Philistines, we are told that:

2 Chronicles 28

¹⁹ The Lord brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel; for he made Judah naked, and transgressed sore against the Lord.

When the Apostle Paul had returned to Jerusalem from one of his missionary tours,

Acts 21

²⁷ The Jews which were of Asia, when they saw him in the temple, stirred up all the people, and laid hands on him,

²⁸ Crying out, Men of Israel, help!

One Common Ancestor

The reader can readily see the naturalness of this, when he remembers that all the twelve tribes were descended from one man, Jacob, or Israel. The term "Israel" is therefore applicable to any or all the tribes; while, because of the prominence of

Judah, the term “Jew” came to be applied to any of the children of Israel, regardless of their tribe.

In speaking of the covenants God says that He will:

Hebrews 8

⁸ ...make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

In order to make it unmistakable that the new covenant is to be made with the entire, undivided people, just as the old covenant was.

Thus we see that the term “Jews” is rightly applied to the same people as is the term “Israelites;” but we must not forget that, strictly speaking,

Romans 2

²⁸ He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh;

²⁹ But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.

The reckoning of the tribes has been lost among the people called Jews, but that makes no difference; they may be called Israelites just as properly as Jews; but neither term is in strict propriety applicable to any of them except to those who have real faith in Jesus Christ: and both terms are, in the strictly Scriptural sense, applicable to any who have such faith, though they be English, French, Greek, Turk, or Chinese.

None of the Tribes “Lost”

Now as to the “lost tribes.” That the ten tribes were no more lost after the close of the Babylonian captivity than they were before, is as plain from the Scriptures as that the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were not lost.

How does anybody know that these two tribes were not lost, that is, lost to sight? By the simple fact that we find reference to them after the captivity; individuals belonging to those tribes are mentioned by name. In the same way we

know that the other tribes existed as distinct after the captivity as before.

Not all the people of Israel were carried away to Babylon; the poorest and least prominent were left in their own land. But the majority of all the tribes were taken away, and so in the royal proclamation at the close of the seventy years, the permission to return was universal, as follows:

Universal Permission to Return

Ezra 1

¹ In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the heart of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a royal proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying,

² Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, the Lord God of heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and He has charged me to build Him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

³ Who is there among you of all His people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is the God), which is in Jerusalem.

The permission to return was unlimited, but not all of any tribe took advantage of it. All the tribes, however, were represented; but those that remained were not thereby necessarily lost. A family cannot be said to be “lost” because they live in a foreign country.

Later on Artaxerxes in his commission to Ezra wrote:

Ezra 7

¹³ I make a decree, that all they of the people of Israel, and of His priests and Levites in my realm, which are minded of their own free will to go up to Jerusalem, go with you.

“All Israel” Represented

Immediately following the proclamation of Cyrus we read:

Ezra 1

⁵ Then rose up the chief of the fathers of Judah and Ben-

jamin, and the priests and the Levites, with all them whose spirit God had raised, to go up to build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem.

We know that the services of the sanctuary were re-established, and none but Levites could be employed in them; and in *Ezra* 3:10-12 we read that when the foundation of the temple was laid,

Ezra 3

¹⁰ ...they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with symbols to praise the Lord.

Even after the resurrection and ascension of Christ we read of Barnabas,

Acts 4

³⁶ ...a Levite, and of the country of Cyprus.

In Luke 2:36-38 we read of

Luke 2

³⁶ ...Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher,

who recognized the infant Jesus as the Lord,

³⁸ ...and spoke of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

Here we see representatives of two of the ten tribes that are supposed to have mysteriously disappeared, expressly mentioned by name as dwelling in Jerusalem. It is most certain that a thing cannot be lost when you know exactly where it is.

The other tribes are not specified, but in *Ezra* 2 we read:

Ezra 2

⁷⁰ So the priests, and the Levites, and some of the people, and the singers, and the porters, and the Nethinims, dwelt in their cities, and all Israel in their cities.

The Twelve Tribes

When the Apostle Paul was on trial for his life, before King

Agrippa, he said,

Acts 26

⁶ Now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers;

⁷ Unto which promise our twelve tribes, instantly serving God day and night, hope to come.

Here we find that the twelve tribes were in existence in the days of the Apostle Paul, and were looking forward in hope to the fulfillment of the promise which God made to the fathers.

Again, the Apostle James addressed his Epistle...

James 1

¹ ...to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad.

We have here sufficient evidence that no one tribe of Israel was ever lost more than another.

All tribal distinctions are now lost, and no Jew can tell to which of the twelve tribes he belongs; and so in that sense, not merely ten, but all of the tribes are now lost, although all the twelve tribes are represented in the Jewish people scattered over the earth.

God, however, keeps the list, and in the world to come will put every person in his proper place, for the city for which Abraham looked, the capital of the inheritance promised to him and his seed, the New Jerusalem, has twelve gates, and on the gates are:

Revelation 21

¹² ...the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel.

Whom the Lord Counts an Israelite

The last two texts suggest another fact, namely, that God's reckoning of the tribes is not after man's reckoning.

1 Samuel 16

⁷ Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart;

and

Romans 2

²⁸ ...he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly;...

²⁹ But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart.

All those who are saved will

Revelation 22

¹⁴ ...enter in through the gates into the city,

but each of those gates has the name on it of one of the twelve tribes, showing that the saved compose the twelve tribes of Israel.

This is evident also from the fact that “Israel” means an overcomer. The Epistle of *James* is addressed to the twelve tribes, yet there is not a Christian who does not know that its instruction and promises are for him.

All“Gone Astray”

And this brings us to the fact that in reality all the tribes are lost,

Romans 3

²³ For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.

Isaiah 53

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Therefore when the Lord Jesus came, He said,

Luke 19

¹⁰ The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

He declared,

Matthew 15

²⁴ I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

This was spoken at the very moment when he was about to confer a blessing on a poor, despised Canaanitish woman, a descendant of those heathen who inhabited the land before the days of Joshua.

Here at last we have located the lost tribes of Israel. Not ten only, but all of the tribes are lost, so completely lost that the only hope of their salvation is in the death and resurrection of Christ.

In this condition we find ourselves, and therefore we can read with delight, as pertaining to us, the promises concerning the gathering of Israel.

Whoever acknowledges himself lost, and depends wholly on Jesus for salvation, will surely be saved, and will be numbered among the twelve tribes.