

Lost Tribes of Israel

Perhaps you have heard of the lost tribes of Israel and wondered what the heck they were talking about. The phrase refers to the ancient tribes of Israel that grew up in Egypt as ancestors of the sons of Jacob. Remember that Jacob had twelve sons who grew up in Canaan, but during the famine they moved their families to Egypt to join their brother Joseph. Joseph had been sold into slavery in Egypt, but God blessed him by using him to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. Because Joseph rightly interpreted and predicted the coming famine, Egypt was saved by storing up great quantities of food during times of plenty. Both Genesis and Exodus 1:2-5 list the names of the sons and tells us that they and their families numbered 70 people when they moved to Egypt. 400 years later when they left Egypt they numbered between two and three million. When they left Egypt they were still divided into tribes called by the names of the sons of Jacob (also known as Israel). When they entered Canaan forty years later, Joshua divided the land up into tribal possession. God gave specific areas of the land in Canaan to each tribe but Levi. Since Levi was the tribe of the priests, they would dwell in cities.

How Did the Tribes Come to be Lost ?

The story of the lost tribes really begins in the book of Judges. There were seven cycles of apostasy in Judges whereby the people would break the covenant with God and fall into idol worship. Then God would allow foreign peoples to invade, plunder and pillage Israel. The people would cry out for mercy and promise to worship and obey only the one true God, then God would forgive and restore them to His blessings. During the last cycle the leaders of Israel came to a startling conclusion, their troubles were due to the fact that they had no king. All the nations that were whipping them had kings with standing armies, so if they just had one of those benevolent kings they too would have peace and prosperity. It never occurred to them that their problems were self induced. God had been disciplining them for their sin. God had told them through Moses at Mt. Sinai that they did not need a king, that God Himself would rule over and protect Israel. About 300 years later the elders came to the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 8:4-8) and demanded a king. Samuel was crushed because he knew what the real problem was, but God told him to not take it personally; "for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected God from being king over them." God told Samuel to warn them of all the troubles a king would cause (1 Sam.8:11-17), but they still demanded a king. Therefore God let them have a king after their own choosing. King Saul was tall dark and handsome, he looked and sounded good to the people, but despite some early success, he was a disaster. God then raised up a new king from the tribe of Judah—David was a man

after God's own heart. Nevertheless, he was still troubled by many mistakes, adultery, murder, and he was a terrible father. David's successor was his son Solomon to whom God gave great wisdom. Solomon did many great things like building the Temple in Jerusalem and expanding Israel's borders and bringing peace and prosperity. Solomon had a great weakness for the opposite sex which led him into the worst kind of sin—idolatry. 1 Kings 11:1-8 tells us that, "Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, all from the idolatrous nations concerning which the Lord had said, 'You shall not associate with them...for they will surely turn your heart away after their gods.'" Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and his wives turned his heart away from the God of Israel. The Lord was angry with Solomon, and He sent word that because Solomon had done this great evil, Israel would be torn in two after Solomon died. Ten tribes would rebel against Solomon's heir so that there would be a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The northern kingdom was called Israel, and was led in rebellion by Jeroboam. The southern kingdom was called Judah, and it consisted of the now very large tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Simeon had been assimilated into the tribe of Judah and was not considered a tribe at that time. The tribe of Joseph had been split into three tribes according to the names of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Part of Manasseh had settled east of the Jordan River so it was now two tribes, East and West Manasseh.

The capital of the southern kingdom of Judah was Jerusalem. The capital of the northern kingdom of Israel was initially Shechem. Shechem dates back at least 4000 years as a Canaanite city in the hill country north of Bethel and Shiloh near Mt. Gerizim. Shechem was the site where Jacob and his sons sinfully settled and mixed in with the idolatrous Canaanites. The result was that Jacob's sister Dinah was raped, and then his sons slaughtered the inhabitants in revenge (Genesis 34). About four really evil kings later, King Omri of Israel purchased a hill nearby from a guy named Shemer (1 Kings 16:24), and Omri built his own city on top of that hill to be his capital. He named it Shomeron which is derived from Shemer's name and we translate that into Samaria.

Samaria

Samaria was the capital of the northern kingdom from that time on until Assyria besieged and destroyed it about 150 years later in 722 BC. The city was built on a hill that had a long flat top, and was a natural fortress. Every king of Israel from that time until 722 BC was more evil than the one before. God sent many prophets to warn them, including Elijah and his protégé Elisha, but Israel would not listen so after hundreds of years of God's patience and

warnings, God allowed the Assyrians to invade and destroy the northern kingdom of Israel. Samaria fell in 722 BC. Shalmaneser V and Sargon II of Assyria maintained control over Samaria, the northern kingdom and all the tribes of Israel that dwelled there. Archeologists have discovered many stones with inscriptions from the Assyrian rulers. One such fragment was found at the site testifying to their presence. Other inscriptions found from Sargon's palace state that the inhabitants of Samaria were deported to Assyria. New foreign inhabitants were brought in to form a new population and a new race of people. In the Bible, 2 Kings 17 details the defeat of Israel, the causes for the defeat, and the resettlement of the people of Israel to foreign lands, along with the importation of foreigners to repopulate the land. Sargon claimed that he carried away 27,290 citizens of Samaria so there was some Israelis who remained. The net effect for the entire area was that there was a mixed population which intermarried under Assyrian rule. They developed a syncretistic religion made up of the Jewish Torah mixed up with a lot of the pagan beliefs that were imported with the new people. The entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea became known as Samaria, and the people were called Samaritans. The mixed population was not accepted as Jewish by their neighbors to the south in Judah. The kingdom of Judah survived another 136 years until it was destroyed by Babylon. Some of the tribe of Levi had remained in the south, and others fled to Jerusalem when Assyria invaded. Thus the tribes of Reuben, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, East and West Manasseh, Ephraim, and Issachar disappeared creating the supposed LOST TRIBES OF ISRAEL. 2 Kings 17:23 says, "Israel was carried away into exile from their own land to Assyria." Concerning the new population, 2 Kings 17:41 says they feared the Lord, but they also served their idols.

The Lost Tribes

Over the years there has been a large amount of speculation about the supposed ten lost tribes of Israel. The phrase "lost tribes" does not appear in the Bible, but it does predict back in 1 Kings 11:31 that the Lord would tear the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon and give ten tribes to Jeroboam (the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel). Many believe the lost tribes went to various places like Iran, and Afghanistan. In 1649 a rabbi in Amsterdam wrote they were living in South America with the native Americans. There are small groups of Jews in India that claim to be descended from Ephraim or Manasseh. Ethiopian Jews claim to be from the tribe of Dan. The Igbo people of Nigeria claim to be the lost tribes. The Pashtuns of Afghanistan claim descent from the lost tribes. Some authors even claim the Irish Celts were descended from the lost tribes. The Book of Mormon claims the American Indians descended from the tribes of Joseph.

Regardless of all the theories and speculation we know that some of the occupants of Israel were exported and assimilated into foreign cultures, some small pockets of Jews in exile maintained their Jewish identity like those in India and Ethiopia, and many of the Jews of the northern kingdom simply became Samaritans. There are approximately 600-700 Samaritans still existing in the West bank of Israel today. Genetic testing confirms that they are descended from Israelites and Assyrians and other foreign peoples.

Samaritans During the time of Jesus

Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC and all the Jews were taken into captivity to Babylon. Persia conquered Babylon, and the Persians allowed the Jews to return to rebuild the city and the Temple in 538 BC. When the Jews of Judah returned they did not accept the Samaritans as Jews. They viewed the Samaritans as half breeds and their religion as idolatrous. When they began to rebuild the Temple, the Samaritans offered to help but were rejected, and then the Samaritans proceeded to prevent the project (Ezra 4:1-24). The Samaritans protested to Persia which stopped the work until Nehemiah arrived. The Samaritans continued hostile actions which made the hatred and division complete. Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Samaritans, and they were forbidden to participate in temple sacrifices. The Samaritans then built a competing Temple on Mt. Gerizim which they claimed was the only true temple, and it was the actual site where Abraham took Isaac in Genesis 22. The Jewish Maccabean king John Hyrcanus captured the Samaritan temple and destroyed it in 128 BC. The continuing hostility continued through the time of Jesus where it is best viewed in the stories of John 4, and in Luke 9:54 Jesus' disciples ask him if He will let them call down fire from Heaven to destroy a Samaritan village. This is why a Samaritan was the perfect guy to use in the parable of the Good Samaritan, because the lawyer asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor", meaning who does the law require me to love and be kind to? Jesus used the people they hated to prove that "your neighbor" is anyone that needs your help.

Perhaps a better question than what happened to the "lost tribes" is why did it happen?

The Warnings Began with Moses

In Deuteronomy 28 Moses warned the people before they ever went into the land that if they broke the covenant, and fell into idolatry that this very thing would happen. Even with such warnings repeatedly from leaders, kings, and prophets, God still was patient for over 700 years. Nevertheless, even the patience of a loving God must cease at a point in time in the preservation of justice. In the northern kingdom, one king after another was even more evil than the previous one, and in spite of the prophetic warnings the idolatry continued so God acted by using the nation of Assyria.

Is God Through with Israel ?

In spite of its transgressions, God will still be faithful to His promises to Abraham and restore Israel not only to the land but also to His blessing. There are numerous prophecies about the restoration of Israel in the end times, and Paul says in Romans 11:26 that in the end times the remnant of Jews remaining at the second coming of Christ will all be saved.

Ezekiel prophesied that the supposed lost tribes will be reunited with Judah. The tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) had become the dominant tribes so Ezekiel wrote, "I will make Judah and Joseph one nation in the land...and they will no longer be two nations..." (Ezekiel 37:15-23) What can we learn from this story? God is love and God forgives, and as Peter said, "God is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.", but at the same time "God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex.34:7). The clock is ticking, therefore make sure that your sins are paid for by the blood of Christ.

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