

# 42 Months to Glory: Could "Israel" BE the Church?

By Larry Simmons

## The Surprising Purpose of the Rapture

Surely no other End Time subject is as hotly disputed as the rapture. Some insist it could happen at any time. Others say it can't come before this or that event. Which ever position you take it is easy to see why there is so much interest in the issue. Grievous afflictions are prophesied for the last days and, naturally, Messiah's followers want to know if they will have to endure them. Have you ever wondered why there are so many opinions on the timing of the rapture? The reason is simple. No matter what anyone says, the Bible never spells out when it takes place! So, interpretations abound. Although prophecy teachers may sound convincing as they rattle off Scriptures which "prove" their positions, in the final analysis, it is still a matter of interpretation.

## The Dominant Understanding

Since the Bible does not specify the exact time, prophecy teachers have taken an indirect approach. They reason that if the purpose of the rapture can be determined, then the timing becomes self evident. For instance, if its purpose is to deliver the saints from tribulation, then the rapture must occur before tribulation starts. Be warned, however, that if you err in deciding the rapture's purpose, the resulting conclusion as to its timing is worthless. We have already alluded to one prominent view, that of the pre-tribulation rapturalists. They think God planned the rapture as the means to deliver Messiah's followers from the seven year tribulation. Hence, they conclude the rapture comes at least seven years before the end of the age. Closely akin to that position are the mid-tribulation rapturalists. They think the rapture is to deliver believers from the last three and a half years of the age, the period they call the Great Tribulation.

Both positions assume that deliverance from tribulation is the rapture's purpose. But Scripture seems to contradict that idea. Rather than affirming that believers are delivered from affliction, the Bible says, "***Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God***" (**ACT 14:22**). Speaking specifically of the last days, Jesus said, "***They will deliver you to tribulation***" (**MAT 24:9**). It should be noted that holders of these views have their own interpretations for those passages. Nevertheless, they are forced into the unenviable position of explaining away the plain reading of Scripture.

Another problem is that those views aren't consistent with what we already know. What is the order of events at the rapture? According to Paul, the dead in Christ are raised first, then we who are alive are caught up in the air. If the rapture is the means for delivering saints from tribulation, why are those who are dead raised first? The coming afflictions certainly wouldn't affect them!

Up to now, there has been a fundamental problem in the search for the rapture's purpose. Simply put, the majority of God's counsel on the End Times has been ignored. Many teachers assume that only the New Testament need be consulted to understand doctrines like the rapture. For that reason, you may be surprised to learn that the Old Testament has something to say about it also.

To most of Messiah's followers the New Testament has taken on a life of its own. In fact, it is usually studied quite independent of the Old Testament, and that is especially so in prophecy. Most End Time teaching refers to very few Old Testament passages—and those few are chosen only because they appear to support favored New Testament positions. The rest of the Old Testament is simply not deemed relevant. What makes this so puzzling is the fact that the New Testament is largely the record of how a particular Old Testament prophecy comes to pass—namely, the prophecy of a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

## The Search Begins

Our challenge then, is to find a purpose for the rapture which fits the whole Bible. As a starting place we go back to the days of Solomon. The Bible records that his son caused the Northern Tribes to rebel and establish a separate nation. Surprisingly, God commanded the tribes of Judah and Benjamin not to resist that secession:

***You must not go up and fight against your relatives the sons of Israel; return every man to his house, FOR THIS THING [the split] HAS COME FROM ME [God] (I Kings 12:24).***

### That left—in THE NORTHERN KINGDOM OF ISRAEL (Ephraim)

1.Reuben	5.Manasseh	9.Levi	from the land by this time.)
2.Gad	6.Issachar	10.Dan (may	
3.Asher	7.Ephraim	have migrated	
4.Naphtali	8.Zebulun		

### And, in THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM OF JUDAH:

1.Judah	2.Benjamin	3.Simeon	4.Levi
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Before long, Israel fell into idolatry. Of course this was a violation of the Sinai Covenant. God responded by saying the people of the Northern Kingdom were no longer His people, and He cancelled their Covenant. Then as promised under the Sinai Covenant, God allowed Israel's enemies to rule over the land. That happened in 722 B.C. when Assyria conquered the Northern Kingdom. The conquest took several years, and the Assyrians were determined that such a foe would never oppose them again. So, they deported all of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom (see **2KI 17:6**). Josephus wrote that Shalmaneser, king of Assyria, "demolished the government of the Israelites, and transplanted all the people into Media and Persia." [Apparently a few inhabitants from the Northern Kingdom managed to escape deportation, as remnants from five tribes are mentioned during the reign of Hezekiah (**2CH 30:6, 10-11**)].

For reasons that will become evident later, we need to ask—did any of those captives ever return to the land of Israel? Historians agree that they did not return. "The ten tribes of Israel never reappeared in the pages of history after their defeat at the hands of Assyria." They didn't come back because they were assimilated and therefore ceased to exist as a separate people.

"In pagan days, captives marching into exile usually marched to extinction—not physically, but as a national entity. Because one set of idols was exchangeable for another, captives usually embraced both the idols and the way of looking at things of their conquerors. This was the starting point of assimilation, further hastened by the custom of embracing each other's women...The captives did not particularly care whether or not they survived as Hittites, Phoenicians, Syrians or Jebusites, as long as they had a chance to continue to live. The pagan was willing to lose both his religious and national identity. Such was the case with the kingdom of Israel."

After Assyria's deportation, Judah was the only kingdom remaining in the land (see **2KI 17:18**). It was made up of the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin, plus a portion of the Levites. Nearly 130 years later, they too were conquered. This time the Babylonians deported nearly all of the remaining descendants of Jacob from the land.

Was national and religious extinction also in store for Judah? On the contrary. The people of Judah, who came to be known as Jews, learned from the experience of their Northern relatives. They astutely replaced Temple sacrifices with instruction at the synagogues. In that way their religion was no longer tied to Jerusalem and could now be practiced anywhere. For the exiles from Judah, that meant there was an alternative to total assimilation by their captors.

Even so, the vast majority of the house of Judah did not escape the fate of their relatives in the Northern Kingdom. After seventy years in Babylon, the Jews were given permission to return home, but only 50,000 went back to the land. Perhaps as many as 95% remained and were ultimately assimilated into the Babylonian culture.

Why is that important? For one thing, it makes us understand where today's "Jews" come from. Strictly speaking, they are descendants of the 50,000 who returned from Babylon. Don't forget that only the tribes of Judah, Simeon, Benjamin, and Levi were represented in that group. This means the descendants of the lost Northern Tribes, as well as those who remained in Babylon, are not considered Jews! It is ironic that today's Jews are referred to as God's chosen people, yet they represent an exceedingly small fraction of Abraham's descendants.

### **The Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) in Prophecy**

The assimilation of the people of the Northern Tribes raises some interesting questions. Didn't God make a covenant with ALL the descendants of Abraham? Because the Northern Tribes disappeared, does Abraham's Covenant now apply only to the house of Judah? Was Jeremiah mistaken when he said God was going to make a new covenant with the house of Judah and with the house of Israel?

To answer we turn back to the Book of Hosea. He was an Old Testament prophet who ministered strictly to the people in the Northern Kingdom. Although He prophesied the nation's demise, Hosea also addressed their future restoration. From him we learn that God was not finished with Israel—nor would He ever be finished with them. Here are the major themes of Hosea:

#### **1. The demise of the Kingdom of Israel.**

Because the Northern Kingdom did not keep the Covenant, God punished them. In fact, Hosea prophesied God would renounce them as His people. *I will put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.* (**HOS 1:4**) *You are not My people and I am not your God.* (**HOS 1:9**)

## **2. God's intermediate plans for them.**

If you want to know what happened to the lost tribes of Israel, look no further than the prophecy of Hosea. Even the naming of Hosea's first child was a clue. God commanded him to call the child "Jezreel," which means "God sows." That tells us the house of Israel would be scattered among the nations like a farmer sowing seeds in his field.

- *My God will cast them away because they have not listened to Him; and they will be **WANDERERS AMONG THE NATIONS.** (HOS 9:17)*
- *Israel is swallowed up; **THEY ARE NOW AMONG THE NATIONS** like a vessel in which no one delights. (HOS 8:8)*
- *Ephraim mixes himself with the nations. (HOS 7:8)*
- *And the remnant of Jacob will be among many peoples like dew from the Lord... And the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations, among many peoples... (MIC 5:7-8)*

So where are the descendants of Israel? According to Hosea (and Micah) you can find them in all the nations. But the story does not end there. Hosea spoke of terrible judgment for Israel, but he also had some good news. In spite of their severe judgment, Hosea promised that God would never forget them. Looking into the future, Hosea prophesied (1) that the Northern Kingdom would be abolished, but (2) her people would thrive in the nations where they were "sown."

*Yet the number of the sons of Israel will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered. (HOS 1:10)*

Despite Ephraim's sin, God still loved them, and He never abandoned His plans for them. Observe how strong were His feelings for the people of the Northern Kingdom.

*How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you O Israel? ... My heart is turned over within Me, all My compassions are kindled. I will not execute My fierce anger; **I WILL NOT DESTROY EPHRAIM AGAIN.** For I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath. (HOS 11:8-9)*

## **3. Ephraim's prophesied restoration.**

To illustrate the long-suffering nature of His love for Ephraim, God told Hosea to marry a harlot. True to her character, she was unfaithful. After leaving Hosea for other lovers, she was eventually sold into slavery. It was then that God commanded Hosea to buy her back. "*Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, **EVEN AS THE LORD LOVES THE SONS OF ISRAEL.***" (HOS 3:1) The lesson was plain. Although God banished Israel, in the next breath He promised that its descendants would be restored!

*And it will come about in that day, that you [Ephraim] will call Me Ishi [Husband] and will no longer call Me Baali [Owner]. (HOS 2:16)*

*And I will betroth you to me **FOREVER.** Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving-kindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the Lord. (HOS 2:19-20).*

*And it shall be that in that place where it was said to them, "You are not My people," There you shall be called the sons of the living God. (HOS 1:10)*

## **The Means of Ephraim's Restoration—The New Covenant**

No doubt you recognize the promises Hosea made to the house of Israel. They are, of course, the familiar promises of the New Covenant. Only those who have entered that Covenant are called the bride of Messiah. Only they can know the Lord, and only they can rightly be called the sons of the living God (see **JOH 1:12**).

This means that since the death and resurrection of Messiah, the New Covenant promises have been available to Ephraim. Has Ephraim responded? Let's take a look. In the Revelation John witnessed a curious event after the sixth seal was broken. Four angels had been directed to bring judgment on the earth, but they were told to wait. Another angel said to them,

*Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the bond-servants of God on their foreheads. And I heard the number of those who were sealed, one hundred and forty-four thousand(s) sealed from **EVERY TRIBE** of the sons of Israel. (REV 7:3-4)*

Twelve thousand(s) were sealed from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. (The symbolism of the number will be covered in another chapter.) There has been a lot of controversy over this passage. Some think it refers to the Jews. Hopefully, by now you realize that cannot be the case, since only four of the tribes can properly be called Jews!

What this passage teaches is that, just as Hosea promised, God has not forgotten Ephraim. For the last 2,700 years, those tribes have been lost to us, but not to God. He has watched over them in all the nations where they were "sown." What's more, He has reserved for Himself a remnant of the tribes which were scattered, and He will cause that remnant to turn back to Him.

*And the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations, among many peoples... (MIC 5:8)*

*A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob (the twelve tribes), to the mighty God. For though your people, O ISRAEL, may be like the sand of the sea, only a remnant will return. (ISA 10:22)*

## **Further End Time Prophecies about the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim)**

Incredible as it seems, God has always planned for the lost tribes of Israel to participate in the New Covenant! Scores of Old Testament verses tell us so. Perhaps the fact that the people have been hidden for 2,700 years has caused prophecy students to overlook Ephraim's part in the End Times. Hosea reminds us, however, that God will not forget Ephraim. In fact, God says He will even bring him back to the land! That's right, to the land of Israel:

*And I will sow her [Ephraim] for Myself in the land. I will also have compassion on her who had not obtained compassion, and I will say to those who were not My people, "You are My people!" And they will say, "Thou art my God." (HOS 2:23)*

*And it shall be that in that place where it was said to them, "You are not My people," there you shall be called the sons of the living God. (ROM 9:26 & HOS 1:10)*

*And I shall save the house of Joseph [Ephraim], and I shall bring them back, because I have had compassion on them; And they will be as though I had not rejected them. (ZEC 10:6)*

Do not let the fact that the house of Judah was also scattered (and then returned) confuse you. These prophecies are not about Judah; they apply to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The fact that we have lost track of the recipients is irrelevant. God made promises to that specific group of people, and He intends to keep them. No replacement theories are necessary, and there is no need for spiritualizing or reinterpreting. One day, multitudes of direct descendants of Ephraim will be brought back into the land!

Now comes another surprise. Not only will the descendants of the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim) suddenly reappear, but after thousands of years of separation, they will be reunited with Judah. Since the days of Solomon, Judah has had nothing to do with its northern relatives, but in the last days that will change:

*Behold I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel, his companions; and I will put them with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they will be one in My hand. (EZE 37:19)*

*Behold I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land; And I will make them ONE NATION in the land, on the mountain of Israel... (EZE 37:21)*

## **The Purpose of the Rapture Revealed**

Hopefully you are convinced that God has not forgotten His promises to the Northern Kingdom (Ephraim). If so, you are ready to tackle the question of how God plans to get the scattered descendants of Ephraim back to the land. To begin, we make the assumption that God has been able to keep track of the descendants in the lands where He has sown them. What's more, we take it for granted that He has the capacity to arrange for a remnant from each tribe to believe that Jesus is their Messiah.

Now let's consider the logistics of transferring all those believers (millions of them) back to the land of Israel. Perhaps enough boats and planes could be acquired, but that doesn't begin to address the larger problems—such as:

1. Modern Israel won't let believers immigrate. Their "Law of Return" grants free immigration to Jews only. In fact, full-blood Jews are disqualified if they believe Jesus is their Messiah. 2. Virtually no New Covenant believers are aware that they may be descendants of the house of Israel or the house of Judah! For that reason they are not likely to make plans go back on their own. 3. For these two reasons, a voluntary return seems out of the question. What's more, Scripture seems to imply the return will be a single event—at the sounding of a trumpet:

*And you will be gathered up one by one, O sons of Israel. And it will come about in that day that a great trumpet will be blown; and those who were perishing in the land of Assyria and who were scattered in the land of Egypt will come and worship the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem. (ISA 27:12-13)*

So, the question remains. How is God going to bring Ephraim back to the land? The answer is—on horseback!

A few days before the battle of Armageddon, God will have "snatched away" the first fruits of New Covenant descendants from Ephraim and Judah (a "Pre-Wrath" position...S.V.). Then at the final harvest, all the remaining descendants who are redeemed are taken into heaven. It is at that time that God goes on the offensive. As soon as all the nations are gathered against Jerusalem, Messiah attacks. He will descend from heaven on a white horse, followed by His vast army. Guess what—they are on white horses too! Who are

they? None other than the glorified descendants of the house of Israel and the house of Judah. They are the remnant which the prophets spoke about—the ones who would be returned to the land of Israel.

All this means that the purpose of the rapture is far more exalted than we have been taught. It appears that God desires for every saint to be a part of the climax of this age—that is, His kingdom coming on the earth. This includes those who are deceased. If that were not so, God would have no reason to raise the dead in Christ at the rapture. Rather, He could wait for them to be raised as part of the first resurrection, which takes place within a few days (see **REV 20:4**).

So, it is by the rapture and final harvest that God brings the scattered remnant from Ephraim and Judah back to the land. That fulfills His word of prophecy, plus it allows the saints to have a part in defeating the ones who oppose God's reign on earth:

***For I will bend JUDAH as My bow, I will fill the bow with EPHRAIM. And I will stir up your sons O Zion, against your sons O Greece; And I will make you like a warrior's sword. (ZEC 9:13)***

***For the Lord of hosts has visited His flock, the house of JUDAH, and will make them like His majestic horse in battle. And EPHRAIM will be like a mighty man. (ZEC 10:3,7)***

***And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and He will assemble the banished ones of ISRAEL, and will gather the dispersed of JUDAH from the four corners of the earth... And they will swoop down on the slopes of the Philistines on the west; TOGETHER they will plunder the sons of the east; they will possess Edom and Moab; and the sons of Ammon will be subject to them. (ISA 11:12,14)***

***And the remnant of Jacob will be among the nations, among many peoples like a lion among the beasts of the forest, like a young lion among flocks of sheep, which, if he passes through, tramples down and tears, and there is none to rescue. (MIC 5:8)***

Who is Included in the Rapture and First Harvest?

Now we come to an interesting question. Is the New Covenant exclusively for descendants of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob? Must you be a descendant to come to faith in Messiah? Remarkable as it seems, that may be the case! A verse in Galatians could be interpreted to say just that:

***And if you belong to Messiah, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (GAL 3:29)***

Support can also be found in the tenth chapter of Romans. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote concerning the Jews and Gentiles who were receiving God's mercy—namely, those who believed in Messiah. To explain what God had done for them, Paul quoted from familiar passages in Hosea:

***I will call those who were not My People, My people. (ROM 9:25 & HOS 2:23).***

At first glance it seems Paul was saying that ANY non-Jew could become one of God's people. Knowing, however, that he was quoting a promise Hosea gave to the house of Israel (Ephraim) gives his words a different slant. We wonder, did the Holy Spirit direct Paul to extend Hosea's promise to Gentiles who were NOT descendants of the twelve tribes? That is certainly a possibility. After all, Paul also taught that God "grafts in" wild branches to the promises of Israel. Now let's go to the second verse from Hosea that Paul used.

***And it shall be that IN THAT PLACE where it was said to them, "You are not My people," There you shall be called the sons of the living God. (ROM 9:26 & HOS 1:10).***

What place did Hosea refer to? "In that place" had to be the locale of the Northern Kingdom. That is where God told Ephraim they were not His people, just before they were sown among the nations. According to Hosea, in that very place, the descendants of Ephraim would once more be called the sons of the living God. That sounds suspiciously like the rapture scenario we just developed. Again, how else will Ephraim's descendants get back in the land?

Why did Paul borrow Hosea's promises to Ephraim and apply them to Gentiles? It may be that the Holy Spirit caused Paul to use Hosea's words for a specific reason. Perhaps those Gentile conversions were nothing less than a fulfillment of Hosea's prophecy! It is possible that Paul's Gentile converts were all descendants of Ephraim (plus the Babylonian Jews who didn't return). If this is so, then a 2,700 year old mystery has been partially solved. At least a remnant of the lost tribes of Israel has been found alive and well—hidden in the church!

Could that really be possible? Well, consider your own genealogy. Can you trace your roots back 200 years? 500 years? How about 2,700 years? You may be surprised to know that modern Israel boasts of immigrants from 180 nations. With that in mind, it is not difficult to argue that Ephraim, with a hundred times more people and an 800 year head start, could settle in at least as many lands as did Judah (the Jews).

## **Author's Comments on the Ephraim / Rapture Theory**

Under the system I had been taught, no one ever attempted to address the numerous prophecies about Ephraim's return. For most prophecy teachers, that portion of Scripture might as well be removed from the Bible. Despite Biblical and historical evidence to the contrary, most blithely assume that all twelve tribes can be found among today's Jews. So far, I have located only one current prophecy book which even mentions the lost tribes of Israel. It reported the possibility of Israelite descendants in China, India, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and especially Afghanistan. Despite all his research, however, the author concluded, "only God knows the true identity and location of the ten lost tribes that disappeared into the depths of Central Asia almost twenty-seven centuries ago."

The search for the ten tribes has been hampered, more than anything, by faulty assumptions. As mentioned, most teachers assume the lost tribes are no longer lost, but are mixed among the Jews. Here are some other suspect assumptions:

### **1. The lost tribes are hidden in remote areas, where they will have retained their ethnic and cultural ties to ancient Israel.**

Much excitement was generated over several thousand Ethiopian Jews who recently returned to Israel. Apparently they had managed to retain a form of Hebrew religion dating back to the days of Solomon. However, that does not "strongly suggest," as one author put it, "that the ten lost tribes could also exist in some part of Asia." In this day of pinpoint satellite surveillance, the idea that somewhere in Asia, there are several hundred million isolated Israelites is ludicrous. Remember, Hosea said they would be "like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered."

The truth is that the ten tribes were completely assimilated. The Assyrians made certain of that. What's more, the Bible indicates they will not have stayed in one place. Hosea said they would be "*wanderers among the nations*" (see **HOS 7:8, 8:8, 9:17**). Micah also said the remnant of Jacob would be "*among many peoples*" (**MIC 5:7-8**).

### **2. The lost tribes must still practice circumcision.**

In Genesis, any descendant of Abraham who was not circumcised was cut off from his people because he broke God's covenant. (See **GEN 17:14**). My friend, don't forget why the Northern Tribes were carried away into Assyria. It was for breaking the Sinai covenant! Is it realistic to expect that they would nevertheless keep the covenant of circumcision, especially after God told them they were no longer His people? Why, even Moses, after being separated only 40 years, failed to circumcise his sons (and was nearly killed for it). (See **EXO 4:24-26**).

It is interesting that those who come into the New Covenant are not required to be circumcised, yet they still belong to Abraham's offspring (see **GAL 3:29**). How could that be? Paul explained that a believer in Messiah receives a circumcision (by the Spirit) that is inward, not external (see **ROM 2:29**). It follows then that the redeemed remnant of Ephraim's descendants are "circumcised" after all.

## **Conclusion**

When I began this work on prophecy, I had no idea that such a concept would surface. Now that it has, it seems to make more sense than either the replacement theories or the dispensational approaches. The strongest argument for this view is that it neither ignores nor conflicts with the prophecies of either Testament. What's more, it does no harm. Accepting these interpretations should not affect evangelistic efforts to the Gentiles any more than it affected Paul's. Why? Because the descendants are well hidden in the nations. At the time of Paul's writing, Ephraim had been "lost" for almost 800 years. Now, another 1,900 years has passed. In Paul's day, as well as our own, only God could know the identity of the descendants. What's more, even if you could spot the descendants, you wouldn't know if they were part of the remnant which will be redeemed.

One final point should be made. While the New Covenant was directed toward Jacob's descendants, that doesn't mean God can't make exceptions. Rahab, Ruth and Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, are examples who come to mind. God appears to have "grafted" these into the promises of Israel, and I fully expect He has done it for others. Moreover, Isaiah wrote that the Egyptians will come to know the Lord in the last days (**ISA 19:21, 25**). Nevertheless, Scripture implies these are exceptions and not the rule.

If, as we propose, the rapture's purpose is to return the redeemed descendants of Israel and Judah to the land, it will occur a few days before Armageddon begins. Be advised, however, that if the trumpet is heard a few years before then, I reserve the right to change my opinion on the rapture's purpose and its timing. In fact, nothing could please me more than to go airborne at the earliest possible date.