

Where Are The Ten Lost Tribes Of Israel

It is an unusual paradox that, while the Jews are so often hated, reviled, and persecuted, there are so many groups of people trying to claim that they are Jews!

For example, the Mormon church teaches that Native Americans are descended from Israelites who left Jerusalem for the New World before their city was destroyed by the Babylonians. Others say the Israelite tribes fathered the Oriental or Black races.

British Israelism, the most popular of these theories, teaches that the English-speaking people of England, western Europe, and America descended from the ten "lost" tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Supporters are bent on proving that the British and American people are specially favored by God, and heirs to Israel's precious covenant promises. Bizarre and unbiblical as this teaching is, defenders are eager to convince the gullible with their "evidence."

The British Israelism Heresy

Lacking any biblical or historical proof for their doctrine, supporters of British Israelism have produced maps describing fictitious migrations of the "ten" Israelite tribes from the Babylon area across Europe to England. They also have tried to connect Queen Victoria with the House of David, saying that the English coronation stone is the stone Jacob slept on at Bethel (Gen. 28:11), but the English stone is a type of red sandstone which is not found anywhere near Bethel.

British Israelism has also concocted a peculiar kind of verbal evidence. It is argued that the word "British" is derived from two Hebrew words: (b'rith, meaning "covenant") and (ish, meaning "man"). B'rith is pronounced "Brit" since the Hebrews never say a "th" sound. Thus, "Brit-ish" is said to come from the Hebrew for "covenant man" or "man of the covenant."

The Hebrew words b'rith and ish simply translate as "covenant" and "man," not "covenant man," and certainly not "man of the covenant." If we were to translate it as a phrase, the closest we could get is "covenant of man." Connections between similar sounding words in Hebrew and English are not supported by The Oxford Dictionary, Webster's Dictionary, or any other study of English word derivatives (etymology), for the two languages are linguistically unrelated.

British Israelism originated in the mid-1600s as a political argument to persuade Oliver Cromwell to allow the Jews to return to England. Appealing to Cromwell's British pride and nationalism, influential patrons convinced him that the Jews represented the southern tribe of Judah, and Anglo-Saxons were descended from the ten northern tribes, which were said to have been scattered and "lost" after being conquered by Assyria in 722 BC. These two groups (the Northern and Southern Kingdoms)-God's Chosen People-should work together until the Throne of England would rule the world with the help of the Jews.

By the end of the 19th century, British Israelism claimed two million supporters-mostly Church of England members. In the 20th century, Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God preached these doctrines. He identified the tribe of Ephraim with Great Britain, Manasseh with the United States, the other Israelite tribes with various European nations, and Judah with the Jews.

Since Armstrong's death, the Anglo-Israel teaching has been repudiated by his church, along with most of his other heresies. A November 1995 Worldwide Church of God study paper, "United States and Britain in Prophecy," reported that Anglo-Israelite literature depends on "folklore, legends, quasi-historical genealogies, and dubious etymologies." It went on to say there is no recorded eyewitness to any Israelite tribal migrations across Europe and that no medieval or ancient genealogies have ever linked the royal families of the British Isles with the Israelites.

British Israelism crosses denominational lines and has no official church organization. Some British Israelite groups go so far as to say God's chosen race, the "true Israel," includes only white Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and kindred peoples. Adam is said to be the father of the white race only, and whites alone have the divinely implanted spirit. All nonwhite peoples are excluded from the redemptive work of Christ. Jews are a "race of vipers," "Satan's seed," "Christ killers," and persecutors of God's "true Israel." These ideas have been adopted by the so-called Christian Identity Movement and Revival Centre International, and other extreme conservative religious organizations, as well as extreme right-wing political groups and survival groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Other organizations sharing these beliefs include the American Nazi Party, Aryan Nation, National Association for the Advancement of White People, and many more.

Not all British Israelism supporters endorse these anti-Semitic extremes. But racist ideas are easily derived from British Israelism because it demotes the Jews and exalts Anglo-Saxons as "true Israel." Racist groups do not hesitate to rewrite history, mistranslate words, and ignore Paul's warning: "Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: . . ." (1 Tim. 1:4; see also Titus 3:9).

The Mystery of the "Lost" Israelite Tribes

Central to British Israelism is the contention that the ten tribes that constituted the Northern Kingdom of Israel were scattered and lost after the Assyrians invaded Samaria. It is said that those ten tribes (excluding Judah and Benjamin, which made up the Southern Kingdom) were not represented when Ezra and Nehemiah brought the captives back to the land around 444 BC. We will see that there is no biblical support for that view which, ironically, appears to have been invented by Jews in the Middle Ages.

The Jewish Encyclopedia says Diaspora Jews may have invented this theory, hoping to avoid persecution as "Christ killers." These Jews claimed innocence, saying they never returned to the Holy Land after deportation to Assyrian captivity centuries before Christ (1901, Vol. 12, p. 250).

Actually, the ancient tribes of Israel have never been lost, except spiritually. Isaiah prophesied that, although the Hebrew people would be scattered among the Gentiles, their nationality would never be lost, nor their identity unknown (Isa. 61:9).

Jews have always been recognizable as Jews and have never lost their Jewishness. However, they are indeed lost spiritually, as the prophets described (Isa. 29:10-14). Over 2500 years ago, God told us that the political revival of Israel would be a spiritually dead revival until a later time when God would breathe life into His people (Ezek. 37:8-9). The Lord also promised to regather all the Jews and unite His beloved people into one great kingdom at Christ's return (Isa. 11:11-13).

History of the Ten Tribes

Are the Jews of today descended only from the southern tribes (Judah and Benjamin) that remained loyal to Solomon's son Rehoboam? The Bible clearly shows that was not the case.

After Solomon's death, the ten northern tribes set up a separate kingdom (Israel) under King Jeroboam, who was not of the House of David (1 Kings 12:20). During the time of the divided kingdom, many Israelites in the Northern Kingdom identified themselves with the House of David (2 Chron. 11:14-17; 15:9; 19:4). The terms "Israel," "Judah," and "Jacob" became interchangeable (Isa. 1:1-3; 48:1; 2 Chron. 19:1; 21:2).

Judah's godly kings (particularly Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah) addressed all twelve tribes and offered up sacrifices on their behalf (2 Chron. 15:8-15; 19:4; 29:24; 35:18). This is the point where British Israelites err most seriously. They wrongly insist that the two-kingdom division between Israel and Judah never ceased. History shows otherwise.

Were the Ten Tribes Lost After the Captivity?

The Assyrians took the Northern Kingdom captive in 722 BC, and the Southern Kingdom was captured by Babylon in 586 BC. Following both invasions, the Jews were deported to the same general geographical area (modern-day Iraq and Iran). Because Babylon and Assyria ruled largely the same territory, the Israelite and Judean captives commingled. Both groups lived as captives under similar conditions. During this time, the divisions, enmity, and rivalry between Judah and Israel ended. Jeremiah says the captors made no distinction between Israel and Judah (Jer. 50:33).

Later, the Book of Esther records that the Jewish people were scattered throughout the Persian empire, and that Esther (along with her uncle Mordecai) thwarted Haman's plot to destroy all the Jews. They not only survived, but they attained some prominence and prosperity in those regions of the empire. They did not need to migrate to Russia, eastern Europe, or distant parts of Asia.

After the captivity, when Ezra and Nehemiah led the dispersed Jews back to the land of Israel from Persia, those who returned were called "all Israel" or "the children of Israel" or "the seed of Israel" (Ezra 6:16-17; 8:25, 35; 10:1; Neh. 7:73; 9:2). Artaxerxes' decree specified that "all they of the people of Israel" were free to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 7:13). Surely no one could argue that the ten tribes were excluded from that return from captivity. In fact, the evidence shows that some returned from all of the tribes-while many remained in positions of influence in Persia.

Exiles from both kingdoms looked forward to a unified national future. They were conscious of a common destiny based upon God's promises to the patriarchs and to the House of David. The Israelite Prophets Joel, Amos, and Hosea had prepared the way earlier when they spoke of national unity and the centrality of Jerusalem or Zion (Amos 9:11). Ezekiel spoke about unification and the coming rule by a descendant of David (Ezek. 37:15-25).

"Jew" and "Israelite": Interchangeable Names

In 458 BC, Artaxerxes allowed Ezra the scribe and the Children of Israel to return to Zion with the priests and Levites (Ezra 7:7, 13; 8:35). Ezra's caravan of over 1800 families was made up of all the "children of Israel," with no mention of tribal distinctions. The Book of Nehemiah likewise reveals that both kingdoms participated in the restoration. The word "Jew" is used eleven times and "Israel" twenty-two times, referring to the same people.

After return from captivity, "Jew" and "Israelite" became synonymous terms, referring to the physical descendants of Abraham through Jacob. Forgetting earlier national differences, purity of the bloodline was the critical issue. Ezra required that all Gentile wives be put away (10:2-11), and the mongrelized Samaritans were spurned (2 Kings 17:24; Neh. 4-6).

The returned remnant grew in numbers during Greek rule (330-167 BC), the Maccabean period (167-63 BC), and Herodian-Roman rule (beginning in 63 BC). By the first century, "the Jews" were a relatively large nation numbering in the millions. Additionally, more Jews lived in Diaspora settlements than in the Promised Land. Those in the dispersion still looked to Jerusalem as their national center, cherished the same history and traditions, grew up under the same laws and institutions, and anticipated a common future.

In the New Testament, there is no hint of any "lost tribes of Israel." In fact, "Hebrew" was used interchangeably with "Israelite" and "Jew"-of the same people.

For example, Nicodemus is referred to as a "ruler of the Jews" and a "master of Israel" (John 3:1, 10). In Mark 15:26 and 15:32, Jesus is called "King of the Jews" and "King of Israel." Paul (a Benjamite) calls himself a Jew in Acts 21:39 and 22:3, an Israelite in Romans 11:1, and a Hebrew in Philippians 3:5.

He also spoke of all twelve tribes having hope in the resurrection (Acts 26:7). James, Jesus' brother, addresses his epistle to "all the twelve tribes scattered abroad" (1:1). Peter spoke to the "men of Judea," addressing them as "fellow Israelites" (Acts 2: 14, 22).

In Scripture, we see that "Hebrew," "Israelite," and "Jew" all refer to the physical descendants of the patriarch Jacob. There is a very important reason why these three names are used synonymously in Scripture: to emphasize that both houses of the nation (all twelve tribes) were and still are God's covenant people, sharing the same promises, blessings, curses, and destiny.

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing nearly one hundred years after Christ, knew that the ten Israelite tribes were not "lost." He said these ". . . tribes are beyond the river Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, not to be estimated by numbers" (Antiquities of the Jews, Book XI, Chapter 5, Section 2). He stated that the Israelites remained "beyond the Euphrates" east of Jerusalem, not west in Britain or the Americas as British Israelism argues. Also, we have much extrabiblical evidence of an ongoing Jewish presence in the region of Babylon.

As late as AD 1835, a medical missionary, Dr. Asahel Grant, placed the ten tribes in the region of Assyria and Media or modern-day Iraq and Iran. In very recent times (after the Islamic revolution in Iran), the Ayatollah Khomeini expelled hundreds of Persian Jews, who resettled in America.

Where Are the Tribes of Israel Now?

God's Word answers this question so clearly that no one should go astray. God declared through Moses that Israel would be plucked from the Promised Land and scattered to the ends of the earth (Deut. 28:63-64). With the Assyrian-Babylonian captivities, God fulfilled this word, and did so again after Rome took Jerusalem in AD 70. But despite unbelievable persecution and tribulation, a remnant of Israel has always survived with their Jewish identity intact.

God said He would return Israel to their land (Deut. 30:1-5), and now He has done so. With the reestablishment of Israel in 1948, we saw an amazing fulfillment of prophecy. How many other nations have been conquered and scattered, only to reoccupy their ancient territory and gain statehood thousands of years later? Who, witnessing Hitler's madness during World War II, would imagine the Jews could survive and reestablish themselves in the Holy Land? But as was divinely foretold, Israel would endure and become one nation (Ezek. 36:24; 37: 16-22; Jer. 23:8; 31:1ff).

How Un-Jewish Those British Are!

Even with all their wonderful and endearing qualities, the British do not act like Jews-lost or otherwise. Beloved, look at the evidence.

Historically, the Anglo-Saxon peoples are an uncircumcised race which, according to Genesis 17:14, excludes them from any national blessing promised to Abraham.

The English are a mixed race descending from many peoples: Angles, Saxons, Picts, Germanic tribes, and many others. Numbers 23:9 tells us that Israel is "a people who dwell apart," meaning they maintain racial purity. Jews have always frowned upon intermarriage with other peoples, viewing this as a form of racial adultery and betrayal.

Wherever the Children of Israel dwelt, they were to keep (and whenever possible, did keep) the Sabbath Day holy (Ex. 31:16-17). Have the British ever kept the seventh-day Sabbath?

The Jews were to abide ". . . many days without a king and without a prince, . . ." (Hosea 3:4). This can be said of the Jews, especially after AD 70-but certainly never of the British, many of whom pride themselves on their royal family!

The Jews were commanded to keep the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread. Have the British, as a nation, ever observed the Passover?

Many promises made to Israel are connected with restoration to their own land from the lands of dispersion (Ezek. 36:24-28). How can these promises possibly apply to the British?

Both the Bible and history make it clear that the Anglo-Saxons and the Israelites are completely different peoples, whose different customs, legends, living patterns, and names reveal separate origins. It does no good to confuse the issue with the racial-transference ideas that British Israelism (and Mormonism) propose. These doctrines distort Scripture and history, and tend to stimulate racism-often against Jews.

Such theories are devilish distractions designed to divert our attention from the most important issue in this dispensation; namely, that each person's eternal destiny depends not on racial descent or nationality, but only on being "in Christ."

Paul tells us in Galatians 3:28 that there are only two significant classes of people: believers (the saved) and unbelievers (the unsaved). All other distinctions are unimportant to God insofar as salvation is concerned.

Nonetheless, the New Testament distinguishes the Jews from other unbelievers (1 Cor. 10:32) in order to emphasize that God has not forgotten His unique relationship with the Jews-nor indeed can He. God still loves the Jews and has a special plan for them (Isa. 49: 14-16).

Let us follow God's leading and not try to rob Israel of her God-given privileges. It is unscriptural and simply wrong to take the promises that God gave to Israel and apply them to other people. The Bible assures us that God will fulfill every vow He made to the Jews: ". . . the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29).

God told Abraham, ". . . I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This promise to Abraham, and to the chosen descendants through Jacob, has never been repealed. Indeed, God's vow has been fulfilled in history so many times that, if men were logical, self-interest alone would spur everyone to bless the Jews-and anti-Semitism would have disappeared entirely!

Both Jew haters and Jew baiters may continue to curse Israel. But our responsibility, as members of the Body of Christ, is to bless the Jews-and especially to share the Gospel with them. Regardless of how our efforts are received, we can rest in the knowledge that God's Word shall not return void; it shall not return without accomplishing what God desires and without succeeding in the matter for which it was sent (Isa. 55:11).

The ten tribes are only "lost" in that they have never been born again. They are spiritually lost, not physically. Won't you try to tell a Jew about Jesus today and help them to be "found?"