

WHAT BECAME OF ISRAEL?

By Hugh J. Schonfield

Introduction

The ingathering of Israel is so intimately associated by students of prophecy with the millennial era of peace that almost every great crisis in human affairs in modern times has produced a crop of speculations as to the fate of the "Lost Ten Tribes."

This kind of speculation started in earnest among Christians with the rise of Protestantism, when the Bible, and especially the Old Testament, became available to the masses in the vernacular. Anxiety to understand the Scriptures brought the Church nearer to the Synagogue than had been possible in many centuries. The help of Jewish scholars was sought to interpret difficult passages, and particularly the prophetic passages, with the result that many Jewish legends and traditions received a welcome in Christian circles. Among these were those which related to the "Lost Ten Tribes."

The quest was encouraged by the contemporaneous dawning of the age of territorial discovery, when Europe had newly awakened to the realisation of the existence of vast unknown lands beyond the seas. In one of these, surely, the Ten Tribes would be found. In the sixteenth century tidings were spread by the Jew David Reubeni of a mysterious Jewish Kingdom somewhere in the East. A few years later Antonio de Montesinos was claiming that the aquiline-featured North-American Indians were the missing Israelites; and as the ominous year 1666 drew near excitement rose to fever pitch. A pseudo-Messiah, Sabbathai Zevi, appeared among the Jews of the Levant. English Christians claimed that to the north of Scotland a ship had been sighted with sails blazoned with the words "The Twelve Tribes of Israel," manned with sailors who spoke only the Hebrew tongue.

Again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the quest went on, culminating in the supposed discovery of the "Lost Ten Tribes" in the Anglo-Saxon races. This was primarily due to two causes,

1. As there was virtually no more territory to be explored, and so the Ten Tribes had not come to light, they must be held to exist unknown to themselves among known peoples.
2. The extraordinary growth of the British Empire, with its strong Christian convictions and interest in the Jews, must portend a high and unique destiny for the English-speaking races.

To these causes others contributed. The nineteenth century was the age of archaeological discovery, when the clues to the dead languages of Egypt and Assyria revealed many of the secrets of the past. The Egyptian civilization, especially, appealed to the imagination of investigators and fiction writers. Inevitably the Great Pyramid, strange monument of strange passages and empty chambers, was called in to tell its asserted prophetic tale in harmony with the latest "Lost Israel" theory. The new science of the Migration of Races also allowed colour to be given by a fanciful history to the arrival of the "Israelites" in the British Isles.

All these manifestations are quite intelligible, and deeply interesting to the student of religion and sociology. But it is quite another matter when the authority of the Bible is claimed for the British-Israelite thesis.

Before we turn to the Bible, however, it is necessary to administer one cold douche to the "Lost Israel" seekers.

THERE IS NO TRACE ANYWHERE IN JEWISH LITERATURE PRIOR TO 70 A.D.

OF A BELIEF IN THE SEPARATE EXISTENCE OF THE TEN TRIBES OF ISRAEL

After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Jewish State by the Romans Jewish thinkers, endeavouring to account for the catastrophe, sought to comfort their despairing and scattered people with visions of a mighty Israelitish army (somewhere in the East) ready to break forth at the Messianic signal and overwhelm the Roman conqueror. To this concept the known might of Parthia lent verisimilitude, and it was due to it that the Messianic rising under Bar-Cochba (Son of a Star) took place in 133 A.D. We find an echo of the Parthian aspect in Rev.16:12. "And the sixth angel poured out his vial on the great river Euphrates; and the water thereof was dried up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared." The new Jewish doctrine was that the Ten Tribes taken captive by the Assyrians had remained intact, and had journeyed eastward a year and a half beyond the Euphrates, whence they would suddenly return at the destined time by the miraculous drying up of the river (Apocalypse of Ezra - 11 Esdras - 13:39-50, c.100 A.D.).

About the same date the author of the Apocalypse of Baruch indites a letter to this imaginary people, to be conveyed by an eagle. He bids the bird "tarry not in any place, nor enter a nest, nor settle upon any tree, till thou hast passed over the breadth of the many waters of the river Euphrates, and hast gone to the people that dwell there, and cast down to them this epistle" (Bar.78:20-22).

In common with these visionaries the Jewish historian Josephus', writing in 93 A.D., alleges that "the Ten Tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers" (Antiq.xi.5:2).

It was these legends which were transmitted by Jews to the Church of the 16th and 17th centuries, and which became the basis for the search for the Ten Tribes. But unfortunately for the British-Israel theory they make the Ten Tribes to be still in the East at the beginning of the 2nd century A.D., when they should have been well on their way to the West long before this.

ALL JEWISH WRITERS BEFORE 70 A.D. ASSUME THAT THE WHOLE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL ARE REPRESENTED BY THE JEWS OF PALESTINE AND THE DISPERSION (and this has always been the orthodox view).

This is evidenced by the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (2nd century B.C.), which regards all the Tribes as being within the Jewish Commonwealth. Still more definite is the Letter of Aristeeas (2nd century B.C.). In this work the story of the mission from Ptolemy is told, when he desired to have a Greek translation of the Scriptures. Accordingly, Eleazar the High Priest sends seventy-two elders to undertake the task, and writes to the king: "The whole people prayed that thy undertakings might ever prosper, and that Almighty God would preserve thy kingdom in peace with honour, and that the transcription of the Holy Law might be to thy profit and carefully executed. And in the presence of them all we selected virtuous men advanced in years, six from each Tribe, whom we are also sending with the copy of the Law" (45-46). The names of the six elders from each of the Twelve Tribes are then listed.

Ignorance both of the Hebrew language and Jewish literature, plus what we call to-day "wishful thinking", has forged the misleading doctrine of British-Israelism. But it does not profit to follow all its quaint ramifications and Biblical misinterpretations. The foundation is the allegation that Israel of the Nine and a Half Tribes has been lost, and to fulfil prophecy has got to be found in some nation or other outside the ranks of the Jewish people (termed Judah, or the Two and a Half Tribes). If the Bible clearly shows this to be an error we have no need to concern ourselves with the rest of the structure, however plausible: it collapses automatically.

We shall therefore limit our Bible study to the single theme of "What Became of Israel?"

PART I. ISRAEL AND THE JEWS

End of the Northern Kingdom

This enquiry necessarily begins with the end of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Nine and a Half Tribes), which took place in 9th year of Hoshea King of Israel when Samaria was captured by the Assyrians (II Ki.17:6). There was a large scale deportation, the captives being carried away and settled in the region east of the Euphrates "in Halah and in Habor by the river Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes."

It is evident from this account that the exiled Israelites were broken up into groups and distributed between various cities. The wisdom of this is obvious, as had they remained united they might at some time have staged a revolt. The Bible nowhere records that they ever came together again, and we are left to infer that death and assimilation gradually reduced their numbers, just as those whom they displaced and who were removed to Palestine (Babylonians, Cuthites, etc.) tended to disappear and be submerged.

The Remnant of Israel

But this does not mean that the Tribes were lost. A remnant remained in Palestine. Isaiah, the prophet of the times, specifically mentions this "remnant of Israel and such as are escaped of the house of Jacob" and declares that they will turn from the heathen ways which had led to the captivity and destruction of their brethren (Isa.10:20-23). The Nazis have followed very closely the Assyrian tactics in our own day with the occupied countries; but always there remains a remnant to carry on the name.

So then, despite the overthrow of the Northern Kingdom, the Ten Tribes remained represented in the remnant who escaped captivity.

To this remnant Hezekiah king of Judah compassionately addressed himself. "And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Menasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord to Jerusalem, to keep the Passover of the Lord God of Israel" (II Chron.30:1). By referring to God thus he hoped to bring together all the Tribes. "So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah... saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria" (vv 3-9). Though the call went partly unheeded, we learn that "a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim and Menasseh, Issachar and Zebulun" obeyed, and "the children of Israel that were present at Jerusalem kept the feast... with great gladness" (vv 18-22). Moreover some made their permanent residence in the Southern Kingdom: "the children of Israel and Judah, that dwelt in the cities of Judah" (II Chron.31:6).

Thus a multitude of Israel did not go into captivity, and a number became associated with the Kingdom of Judah.

The Promise of Ingathering

But what of the fate of the Exiles? A promise is made that God would remember them, and there would be an ingathering of the survivors or their descendants "from Assyria... and the coasts of the sea" (Isa.11:11). The sea in question is of course the Black Sea, as may be seen from reference to a Bible Atlas.

The penitent outcasts would not return to Palestine as a national body. How could they since they were so scattered? "Ye shall be gathered one by one, O ye children of Israel" (Isa.27:12-13). "Return, thou backsliding Israel... and I will take you one of a city, and two of a family, and I

will bring you to Zion" (Jer.3: 12-14).

This restoration presupposes a captive remnant which had not lost its identity. It must therefore have taken place in Bible times. There is room, however, for a greater fulfilment in the final restoration of those known as Jews, the general term since the Babylonian Exile for all the dispersed of Israel of all Tribes.

Certainly a partial ingathering did take place, when members of the whole Twelve Tribes returned after the Babylonian Exile. The prophet of this Exile was Ezekiel. His commission was not to Judah, or to a people which had lost its identity. "And he said unto me, Son of Man, I send thee to the children of Israel" (Ezek. 2:3). "Thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel" (Ezek.3:5).

Israel after the Babylonian Exile

We read in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah that the remnant returning from both captivities went up to Palestine in two waves, the first led by the fathers of Judah and Benjamin (Ezra 1:5), but including many from the other Tribes. "And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in their cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem (3:1). In the second wave "there went up some of the children of Israel, and of the priests, and the Levites... in the seventh year of Artaxerxes the king" (7:7).

The reconstituted people appear as "the fathers of Israel" (Ezra 8:29), "the people of Israel" (Ezra 9:1), "the children of Israel" and the "seed of Israel" (Neh.9:1-2), and even as "all Israel" (Neh.12:47). In their collective prayer, led "by the Levites, they refer to God's graciousness for not utterly consuming and forsaking them, and praise Him for keeping covenant and mercy in all the trouble "that hath come on us... and on our fathers, and on all thy people, since the times of the kings of Assyria unto this day" (Neh.9:31-52). It is manifest that it is one united people ingathered of all the Tribes that is speaking.

The prophets of the post-exilic period were Haggai and Zechariah. The former refers simply to the people", but the latter joins the two branches together, the house of Judah and house of Israel (Zech.8:13), and looks forward to the day "when the eyes of man, as of all the tribes of Israel, shall be toward the Lord" (9:1). "The two families which the Lord hath chosen" are together again, one nation" (Jer.33:24), thus fulfilling Ezekiel chapters 34, 36 and 37 in their primary sense. "And I will make them one nation... and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all" (Ezek.37:22). This nation of ALL the Tribes is the Jewish Nation.

The Witness of the Gospels

The conclusion to which the Old Testament leads us is endorsed by the New Testament. Jesus never went outside Palestine, yet He says: "Verily, I say unto you, I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" (Matt.8:10). He tells his apostles not to go into the way of the Gentiles but go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt.10:5-6, cf. also 15:24).

The angel tells Joseph to go into "the land of Israel" and he came into "the land of Israel" (Matt.2:20-21). John the Baptist, who preached only to Jews was to turn many of the children of Israel to God (Lk.1:16). He declared that the Messiah should "be made manifest to Israel" and therefore he was baptizing (Jno.1:31). Anna the prophetess, who welcomed the infant Christ, was of the supposedly lost Tribe of Asher (Lk.2:36). Onlookers of Christ's miracles declare "It was never so seen in Israel" (Matt.9:33). The prophecy of the betrayal money, "the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value" is applied to the Jewish chief priests (Matt.27:9). John the Baptist was in the desert "till the day of his shewing unto Israel" (Lk.1:80).

All these references can bear no other meaning than that the Jews are the whole house of Israel.

The Witness of the Acts

Peter addresses the assembled Jews out of all lands as "ye men of Israel" (2:22, 3:12). The people of Israel (with the Gentiles, Herod and Pilate) crucified Christ (4:27). The Jewish court is "the senate of Israel" (5:21). Paul is sent to the children of Israel (9:15). He accordingly preaches in the Synagogues of the Dispersion to "the men of Israel" (13:16). He declares that John the Baptist preached to "all the people of Israel" (13:24). In his defence before King Agrippa he refers to "our Twelve Tribes, instantly serving God day and night" (26:7), as sure both of their consciousness as Israelites and their identity with the Jews. It is to these Twelve Tribes of the Jewish Dispersion that the Epistle of James is directed (Jas 1:1).

According to the Apostles, then, none of the Tribes are lost. "Hath God cast away his people?" asks Paul. "God forbid! For I also am an Israelite... God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew" (Rom. 11:1-2). The "Lost Ten Tribes" theory, therefore, has no warrant in Scripture.

PART 2. ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

The People of God

The Church is known as the People of God, and consequently it has become a fashion to speak of the Jews by contrast as "God's Ancient People." This implication, contradicted by Paul, is entirely unauthorised by the Bible. God made no promises to any but to Abraham and his seed. He made no covenants, old or new, except with Israel and Judah (Jer. 31:32). The New Covenant sealed with the blood of Christ was a covenant with Israel. The Adoption, that is the Sonship of God, belonged specifically to Israel (Exod. 4:2). As this Israel is the Jewish people, what then is the Church? The Bible answers, the Church is that part of the Jewish people which has received Christ, together with the predestinated Gentiles. The Church is believing Israel as distinct from the rest of the Jews (unbelieving Israel). But both will one day be one, when all Israel shall be saved. This truth is the great theme of the Pauline Epistles.

Unless we understand that Israel" consists Jointly of the Church and the Jews we shall not apprehend the Plan of God. There is no peradventure, spiritual or symbolic sense, about this clear teaching. The Apostles held and preached that the Church was that very same Israel which was descended from Abraham, which was redeemed from Egypt, which was given the Law, which entered the promised Land, and for whom in the end Christ died. The Church was no new creation, no afterthought on the part of God. There was no "break in the continuity of God's relationship with His one and only people; but there was a new forward impulse, a new building up, a new recruiting. And the large number of those who now became a part of Israel were formerly Gentiles. There was a mystery here that required revelation; but there was no novelty.

The Church was not founded by Christ, but it was built up on Him. Through His coming the Spirit of God was poured forth on Israel, according to the prophecy of Joel. Israel had always been the Church (Heb.2:12 quoting Ps.22:22). Stephen speaks of Moses "that was in the Church in the wilderness" (Acts 3:38). In writing to Christians, who had once been Gentiles, the Apostles invariably spoke of the patriarchs, prophets, and people of Israel in the past as our fathers (I Cor.10.1). The word had been sent by God to the children of Israel, and now in the new dispensation "in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness is accepted with him" (Acts 10:35-36). God had purposed to take out from among the Gentiles a people for His name, and to this agreed, the words of the prophets (Acts 15:14-18).

We must therefore consider Israel under the Church aspect.

The Revelation of the Mystery

There was a mystery, says Paul, "which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." And what Was the mystery? "That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs (with the natural Israelites), and of the same body, and partakers of God's promise in Christ by the gospel" (Eph.3:5-6). As being no longer Gentiles, but Israelites, they have been "chosen", "adopted as sons of God", "accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:4-6). They have been led by the Spirit of God, and are therefore the sons of God. "And if sons, then heirs... For whom God did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom.8:14-17, 29-31). The doctrine of predestination is thus explained as having application exclusively to the calling out of believers from among the Gentiles.

The grace, wherein the former Gentiles now stand, is the gift of God. "Wherefore remember that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh... were without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise... but now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ... Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens" (Eph.2:8-22).

But if the converted Gentile is an Israelite, he must also be of the seed of Abraham; and this he is by faith in Christ, as Paul establishes.

The Seed of Abraham

"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham"(Gal.5:7-9). But how can these Gentile believers be the seed of Abraham when they have not come under the Law? The answer is that the promise to Abraham was of faith. The Law could not be kept by those to whom it was given, and the Covenant was made void by being broken. But Christ came, who was the seed of Abraham, and redeemed Israel from the curse of the broken Covenant. Therefore those who are in Christ are made Abraham's seed, (3:26-25) "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly"(Rom.2:28).

Elsewhere Paul argues that the promise was to Abraham our father by faith, and therefore that the household of faith is heir to the promises (Rom.4). "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel: neither, because they are the (natural seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, in Isaac shall thy seed be called. That is, they which are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed" (Rom.9:8-9). He applies the prophecy of Hosea "I will call them my people, which were not ray people" to the believing Gentiles.

It follows, then, that all Christians are Israelites. This, however, does not mean that the disobedient Israelites have been cast away by God. The bringing into Israel of the Gentile believers is to provoke them to jealousy, to open their eyes, to bring them back to the right way. Had they been wise they might have known this. "First Moses saith, I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you. But Esaias is very bold, and saith, I was found of them that sought me not; I was made manifest unto them that asked not after me. But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people" (Rom.10:19-21).

This teaching is confirmed by Peter. "Unto you (former Gentiles) which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner, and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence... But ye are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, an holy nation (Exod.19:6), a purchased people... which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God" (I Pet.2:2-10).

New Covenant Israel

Christians now rightly and truly bear the titles of the Covenant People. Those of them who are of Gentile origin and no longer Gentiles "but Israelites, and are admonished to have their conversation honest among the Gentiles (I Pet.2:12) as a group to which they no longer belong. Just as Paul speaks of those who "were in time past Gentiles." There are now, therefore, three orders, the Jews (those of Israel outside the Covenant), the Gentiles (non-Israelites outside the Covenant), and the Church of God (Israel inside the Covenant, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles), cf.1 Cor.10:32.

It is this New Covenant Israel, Christian Israel, which is everywhere spoken of in the New Testament as "the elect" or "the election", which is the same word as "chosen" in the concept of the Chosen People.

But the New Covenant Israel is not to dispossess Israel outside the Covenant. The Jews are not cast off. Otherwise, says Paul, how did I, an Israelite (a Jew) find Christ? The situation is like that at the time of Elijah. Just as then there were 7,000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal, "even so at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace."

And what of those in Israel who were blinded? They have stumbled; but they have not fallen. And through their temporary incapacity there has arisen a vacancy in the Divine service, which the Gentile believer has been called in to fill.

Neither must the Israelite of Gentile origin, who has been grafted into the stock of the olive tree of Israel, forget that the argument works both ways. If the lapse of part of Israel has brought salvation and adoption to the Gentile, it is equally true that the calling out of the Gentiles is to provoke the rest of Israel to repentance and restoration (Rom.11:11-15).

The warning is also given to the incorporated Gentiles not to boast, but to stand by faith, "for if God spared not the natural branches of Israel, take heed lest he also spare not thee." All shall be well "if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Rom. 11:18-22). Moreover, the broken off branches through believing shall be ingrafted again into their own olive tree. "For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved (Rom. 11:23-27).

The Second Mystery

Here is the second mystery. The first was that the predestined Gentiles should become Israelites, by faith in Christ. The second mystery is that when the number of those called out from among the Gentiles shall be completed, then the lost sheep of the house of Israel shall be restored through the same faith. There will be no such thing, as is sometimes spoken of, as God's Heavenly People the Church, and God's Earthly People the Jews. But there shall be "one fold and one Shepherd." To this also agree the words of the Prophets. "For God hath shut them all up together in unbelief, that he might have mercy on all. O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! (Rom.11:30-36).

What then is the end of the matter? We have demonstrated them the Bible - and could have elaborated further if need be - that there are no Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, but the Jewish People represent all the Tribes. That the Church is this same Israel (as to its believing part, joined with those called out to be Israelites from among the Gentiles). That in the "time of the restoration of all things" there will be a reunion of the rest of Israel with the "Israel of God" - and so ALL ISRAEL shall be saved; as it is written: "There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: for this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins."

The future of the Church and the Jews is identical, ONE ISRAEL. They shall be the same people

performing the same Divinely ordained service. They shall be the priestly kingdom ministering to all other kingdoms, the holy nation sanctifying all other nations.

The writer would like to add by way of postscript that as all British Christians are Israelites in any case, by faith in Christ, they have no need to drag in the Ten Tribes to establish their claim. It is the Brit (Covenant) in their nature that has significance, not that in their name. Non Angli Sed Angeli, and also Not Saxons but Saints.