

A LEADING Jewish rabbi recently stated on a Los Angeles radio station: "I have always been very much interested in the whereabouts of the lost tribes."

Why? Because the rabbi, like other leaders of Judaism, is very much aware that the Jewish people are not the whole of Israel.

The Jews know they are basically descended from just two main tribes, Judah and Benjamin, with perhaps lesser increments of Simeon and the priestly tribe of Levi.

But when it comes to the question "Where, then, are the rest of the twelve tribes today?" — they are as much in the dark as anyone.

The ancient united nation of Israel was divided into two nations — called Israel and Judah — almost immediately after the death of Solomon. This division came about as a God-ordained punishment for Solomon's disobedience. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, triggered the actual split by refusing to lighten the Israelites' heavy tax load. Indeed, he threatened to make it much heavier. As a result most of the tribes revolted (I Kings 12).

From that time on, four whole books of the Bible detail the separate national histories of the House of Israel (the so-called ten tribes) and the House of Judah. But the House of Israel ceased as a nation when it was completely overrun by Assyria in 721-718 B.C.

What Happened to the People?

The Bible records: "In the ninth year of Hoshea the king of Assyria took Samaria [Israel's capital city], and carried Israel away into Assyria, and placed them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes . . . And the king of Assyria did carry away Israel unto Assyria, and put them in Halah and in Habor by the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes" (II Kings 17:6; 18:11).

But were all the people really removed? A contrary view is expressed by the late archaeologist William F. Albright: "We now know that the Israelites continued to occupy most of [the allotment of] Ephraim and parts of Galilee and Gilead, and that there were Israelite minorities in Ammon, Syria and Phoenicia" (*The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra*, p. 74).

But how do "we know"

WAS ALL OF ANCIENT ISRAEL REALLY CARRIED CAPTIVE?

Most Christians assume that all the ancient Israelites became Jews. Others suppose the "House of Israel" — the so-called "lost ten tribes" — simply lost their identity and ceased to exist as a people by becoming merged in the mass of Middle Eastern humanity. Clouding the issue in both suppositions is a widespread assumption that those tribes (except a few) were never really removed from the Holy Land.

by Lawson C. Briggs

this? And *how long after* the Assyrian conquest may some of Israel have remained in the Promised Land?

While we may grant the possibility of individuals having found asylum in Ammon, Syria, Tyre, etc., the evidence is that no significant number of Israelites in Israel ultimately escaped the Assyrian dragnet.

Probably the best-known extrabiblical account of deportation from Israel is found in the annals of the Assyrian king Sargon: "At the beginning of my royal rule, I... [conquered] the town of the Samaritans... I besieged and conquered Samaria (Sa-me-re-na), led away as booty 27,290 inhabitants of it. I formed from among them a contingent of 50 chariots and made remaining inhabitants assume their social positions" (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, third edition, edited by James B. Pritchard, p. 284). Here only 27,290 people were taken, all specifically said to be from the capital city. Evidently others in the city at that time were left behind. But this is only what Sargon did in his first year.

Did Israelite deportation end there? Assuredly not! Nor in fact had it begun there. Leaving aside the question of how many Israelite slaves the Assyrians may have taken from other localities during the long three-year siege of Samaria, notice that a great portion of Israel had already been completely removed by a previous invasion. The fragmentary annals of King Tiglath-pileser III tell us: "...-nite, Gal'za [Gilead?], Abilakka [the plain of the upper Jordan River] which are adjacent to Israel (*Bit Hu-um-ri-a* [the House of Omri, Assyrian name for the House of Israel since the days of powerful King Omri]) and the wide land of Naphtali, in its full extent, I united with Assyria. Officers of mine I installed as governors upon them.... All its inhabitants and their possessions I led to Assyria. They [the people of the remaining western regions of the kingdom]

overthrew their king Pekah and I placed Hoshea as king over them..." (*ibid.*, pp. 283, 284).

Notice in this case that the entire population of Israel east of the Jordan, in the upper valley and as far south as Galilee, was removed.

Parallel Bible accounts word it: "And the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul king of Assyria, and the spirit of Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria [the Babylonian and Assyrian names of the same king], and he carried them away, even the Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, and brought them unto Halah, and Habor, and Hara, and to the river Gozan, unto this day" (I Chron. 5:26).

And also: "In the days of Pekah king of Israel came Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria, and took Ijon, and Abel-beth-maachah, and Janoah, and Kedesh, and Hazor, and Gilead, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali, and carried them captive to Assyria" (II Kings 15:29).

About half of the House of Israel had been taken away as a result of this earlier invasion. Sargon removed an additional number. And the removal process continued yet for many years. Some further facts will help to explain what happened.

The Empty Land

The Bible tells us that the Assyrians brought other settlers to Palestine to replace the vanished Israelites — "men from Babylon, and from Cuthah, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria..." (II Kings 17:24).

They were placed in all the cities of the land. But we must not assume that this all happened immediately. The Bible does not tell us which Assyrian king was responsible for this colonization. Instead, from the vantage point of a later time, it speaks of the entire process as an accomplished fact. The truth is whole decades were involved.

King Sargon, who claimed the capture of the capital city, also tells

us who *he* brought into the land. And they were *not* the city-dwelling Samaritans just mentioned. Those came later.

Sargon warred with the Arabs of the desert. "Upon a trust-inspiring oracle given by my lord Ashur, I crushed the tribes of Tamud, Ibadidi, Marsimanu, and Haiapa, the Arabs who live far away in the desert and who know neither overseers nor officials and who had not yet brought their tribute to any king. I deported their survivors and *settled them in Samaria*" (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts, op. cit.*, p. 286).

Perhaps those "survivors" were few. And the native-born Israelites continued to be deported, for the land became seriously underpopulated. Then, with no one to keep them in check, predatory wild animals increased drastically. The later-arriving Samaritans found them to be a dangerous plague (II Kings 17:26).

How long did Israelites remain in the land? Are there any clues?

Numbers of people from the northern territory came south to Jerusalem to keep the great Passover of King Hezekiah of Judah (II Chron. 30:10-11, 18). But a comparison of II Chronicles 29:3 with II Kings 18:9-10 shows this occurred three years before the siege of Samaria.

Why does II Chronicles 30:6 speak of the Northerners as the "remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria"? These people had escaped that first great deportation of nearly half the nation performed by Tiglath-pileser. Note that these people went back home after the Passover (II Chron. 31:1).

Were there, however, say 20 years later, still Israelites in their land? Certainly there were. Sennacherib, king of Assyria, mentions a "Menahem of Samsimuruna" — obviously an Israelite — among other rebelling rulers in the lands of Israel, the Philistines and Phoenicia (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts, op. cit.*, p. 287).

As a result of this rebellion, Sen-

nacherib marched his army back into the area, mopped up the opposition and even besieged Jerusalem. Though God delivered King Hezekiah and Jerusalem out of his hand, he also swept into captivity over 200,000 *Jews* from the surrounding parts of Judah. No doubt the rebels of Israel were also taken away.

How Much Integration with Judah?

It would be surprising, in such times of trouble, if many Israelites did not take flight to safer lands — to Egypt, across the sea to Crete, Asia Minor and Greece, and to other places. In the stress of those days, others experienced a revival of true religion, returning to the worship of YHWH at Jerusalem (II Chron. 34:6-9; 35:18). Some of these perhaps ultimately moved southward and blended into Judah.

The Bible hints at this also. Hezekiah's son — the wicked king Manasseh who finally repented — married a woman from Galilee who became the mother of his son and successor Amon (II Kings 21:19). So did good king Josiah, Amon's son (II Kings 23:36). Josiah's Galilean wife became the mother of King Jehoiakim.

Even earlier some had left Israel and joined Judah for reasons of religion (see II Chron. 15:9).

Before the captivities began, the Prophet Isaiah had prophesied this result: "And in that day it shall come to pass, that the glory of Jacob [Israel] shall be made thin And it shall be as when the harvestman gathereth the corn" [the harvesters (Assyrian conquerors) will have gathered everyone, except for a few in hiding they might accidentally miss]. . . . Yet gleaning grapes shall be left in it, as the shaking of an olive tree, two or three berries in the top of the uppermost bough, four or five in the outmost fruitful branches thereof, saith the Lord God of Israel. At that day shall a man [those who are left] look to his Maker, and his eyes shall have respect to the Holy One of Israel . . .

In that day shall his strong cities be as a forsaken bough . . ." (Isa. 17:4-9).

But the fact that a few Israelites intermarried into Judah does not mean Israel and Judah ceased to be two separate peoples. That would be like saying that because a minority of Japanese settled in the United States there is no more a distinct Japanese nation! Luke 2:36 mentions *one* woman of the tribe of Asher resident at Jerusalem in the first century A.D. We have no indication whether she or her family had come to Jerusalem recently or centuries before. But one thing is certain. The bulk of the tribe of Asher was not there.

As late as Assurbanipal, whose reign over Assyria spanned the middle of the 600's B.C., additional settlers were being brought in to replace the now totally missing Israelites. ". . . The Dinaites, the Apharsathchites, the Tarpelites, the Apharsites, the Archevites, the Babylonians, the Susanchites, the Dehavites, and the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Assnapper [Assurbanipal] brought over, and set in the cities of Samaria . . ." (Ezra 4:9-10).

This may be an indication that the final contingent of Israel had been removed only shortly before.

A scant generation later, Ezekiel recorded the attitude of Judah toward the lands formerly occupied by Israel: "Again the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of man, thy brethren, even thy brethren, the men of thy kindred, and *all* the house of Israel *wholly*, are they unto whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem have said, Get you far [geographically] from the Lord: unto *us* is this land given in possession." They wanted to possess that land.

"Therefore say, Thus saith the Lord God; Although I have cast them far off among the heathen, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet will I be to them as a little sanctuary [that is, God would watch over them for good] in the countries where they shall come" (Ezek. 11:14-16).

They never returned. And when later the nation of Judah was taken away too, the Jewish people were placed in a *different* location in the Babylonian Empire — *not* including the areas of Israel's captivity. Those areas in Assyria had become part of the Median Empire.

The Israelites were carried away "unto this day" (I Chron. 5:26), the time when the books of Chronicles were written after the return of the Jews under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah.

What Josephus Said

The noted Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote of the lost tribes of the northern House of Israel just after the time of Christ. Even in the latter half of the first century A.D., Josephus was able to report: ". . . Wherefore there are but two tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans, while *the ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude, and not to be estimated by numbers*" (*Antiquities*, book XI, chapter V, section 2). *

This is further confirmation that the houses of Israel and Judah were still not united even as late as the first century A.D. It was in part a preparation for later reaching some of these separated Israelites that Jesus commanded the apostles as He sent them on their first "trial run" during His earthly ministry:

". . . Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; but *go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*" (Matt. 10:5-6). It was the Apostle Paul who was later sent to the Gentiles (see Acts 13). He went to the cities of Asia Minor such as Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, etc. These were *not* Israelite cities, though contingents of Jews dwelt in each. The Gentile Samaritans were still occupying Israel's former land.

Though it is prophesied to occur in the future (Ezek. 37), the House of Israel and the House of Judah have never been reunited. □