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| **Were the “Lost Tribes” Ever *Really* Lost?****by James Tabor**The precise term “Lost Tribes,” which we and others use to refer to the captivity and eventual dispersion of the ten tribes of the *northern*House of Israel by the Assyrians in the 8th century BCE, never occurs in the Scriptures. This raises a valid question as to whether our research and attempts to identify these Israelites might be illegitimate from a Biblical point of view. Indeed, there are those who maintain that the Northern Ten Tribes were *never lost* at all, and are now *part* of the Israelites whom we identify today as the Jewish people. If such be the case, then the entire goal and purpose of United Israel of Jerusalem and this web site is truly a misguided waste of time. So, from our viewpoint, this issue is of vital interest to us and to all our readers.Actually, from a *prophetic*point of view, there is a sense in which those northern tribes of Israel, known in the prophets as the House of Israel, or by the names Ephraim or Joseph, were never lost—certainly not to God. The LORD (YHVH) declares, about the future great ingathering of all the tribes of Israel that is to *rival* the Exodus from Egypt, “For My eyes are upon all their ways: they are *not hid* from My face...” (Jer 16:14-18; Cf. Jer 3:11-18). The prophet Amos makes the point even more sharply, again recording the very words of the LORD (YHVH):Behold the eyes of the LORD (YHVH) God are upon the sinful kingdom [northern House of Israel], and I will destroy it from off the face of the earth; except that I will *not utterly destroy* the house of Jacob, says the LORD (YHVH). For lo, I will command, and I will sift the House of Israel among all nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the *least grain* fall upon the earth (Amos 9:8-9).The consistent picture one gets in the Prophets is that at the time of this massive ingathering these Israelites will be scattered worldwide, mixed among the nations so as to be indistinguishable, yet, nonetheless, respond to a specific Divine signal or call in the times of the Messiah (Isa 11:12; 10:20-22).This article will consider five areas of evidence to justify our contention that those ten northern tribes of ancient Israel were essentially *lost* to history until our time, that they have remained largely separated from the tribe of Judah (the Jewish people today), and that their identification and restoration is an essential part of the Divine plan for the redemption of the world. We will survey the following areas in this order: the Biblical, the historical-literary, the archaeological, the rabbinic, and the prophetic.**The Biblical Record**We begin with the historical books of the Bible itself. 1 Kings 11 records the division of the Twelve Tribes of ancient Israel into two distinct kingdoms or “houses,” following the death of Solomon in the 10th century BCE. Jeroboam, who was from the tribe of Ephraim, and thus not of the royal line of David, is told by Ahijah the prophet that the LORD (YHVH) would *divide*the kingdom, giving him “ten pieces,” or tribes, leaving only one, the tribe of Judah (with portions of Levi) in the south, centered in Jerusalem. This southern kingdom of Judah would continue the monarchy of David, fulfilling the promise God had made that David’s line would never perish and would eventually produce the Messiah (I Kings 11:26-35; Psalm 89). In the rest of the book of 1 Kings, and throughout 2 Kings, we read the detailed story of the entirely *separate* history of what is called the “Divided Kingdom,” that of the House of Israel in the north, and the House of Judah in the south, with their distinctive ruling dynasties. All of the prophets, from Hosea through Ezekiel, consistently maintain this distinction and tailor their messages to either the kingdom of Israel or that of Judah (or sometimes both). The Exiles of these respective kingdoms are approximately 135 years apart, the former by the Assyrians (8th century BCE) and the latter by the Babylonians (6th century BCE). The northern kingdom eventually turned to the worst sort of idolatry, and her kings, such as the infamous Ahab, along with his wicked wife, Jezebel, abandoned completely the service of the LORD (YHVH) and His Torah-based Covenant with the people of Israel (1 Kings 16:30-33). 2 Kings 17 offers a chilling summary of 200 years of apostasy and declares that the Exile of northern Israel from their land by the Assyrians in the late 8th century BCE was God’s punishment for their sins. The writer of Kings puts it most succinctly:So the LORD (YHVH) was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left... (2 Kings 17:18).The devastation of the northern kingdom of Israel came in a series of military campaigns by the Assyrians, first under Tiglath-Pileser (c. 730 BCE), and subsequently by Shalmaneser V and Sargon II (722 BCE). The Assyrian policy was to actually ***deport*** the populations of those areas they conquered, resettling the land with non-native peoples (2 Kings 15:29; 17:6, 24). These new residents of northern Israel came to be known as the Samaritans. The writer of Kings records:In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria. He settled them in Halah, and in Habor, by the river Gozan, and in the towns of the Medes (2 Kings 17:6 & 18:11). [(1)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn1)Most scholars locate these areas to the region north and west of Nineveh, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.[(2)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn2) It is noteworthy that both the writer of Kings, as well as the Chronicler, record “they are still there today” (2 Kings 17:23; 1 Chron 5:26). Since the Chronicles were written as late as the 5th century BCE, *after* the return of Judah from Babylonian Exile, it is clear that the writer (traditionally Ezra) knew that these northern ten tribes *remained in Exile* in his day, that is, after the time that Judah and Jerusalem were restored. This is*the last trace*we get of the Northern Ten Tribes in the historical portions of the Hebrew Scriptures.The books of Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as the Chronicles, record the return of the tribe of Judah (with portions of Benjamin and Levi) from Babylonian Exile between 539-520 BCE. Some have mistakenly understood references in these texts which refer to some of the additional tribes, other than Judah, or to all twelve tribes, as implying that the northern tribes, deported by the Assyrians, also returned to the Land *en masse* during this period in response to the decree of Cyrus. *This is entirely without basis.*We do know that even during the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah, kings of Judah, over a hundred years earlier, *portions*of the northern tribes (Ephraim, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulon, Issachar) did come to Jerusalem for Passover, even though the bulk of the population had been deported to Assyria (2 Chron 30:1-18; 34:6-9). This indicates that the Assyrians did not carry away the total population, some small numbers of these northern Israelites were left in the land, particularly those who were attached to Judah and Jerusalem. This was especially the case with the small tribe of Benjamin, and many Levites. In the 6th century BCE, under Ezra and Nehemiah, the same was the case. There were *some*northern Israelites who returned with Judah, but the lists of names and families make it clear that the overwhelming majority of the 42,000 returnees were from Judah, Benjamin, and Levi. Detailed lists are given with tribal affiliation (Ezra 2; Nehemiah 7, and esp. chapter 11). Of course, these courageous pioneers were full of faith that the great promises of their Prophets for a full and final Restoration of *all* Israel was at hand. Accordingly, when the Temple was rebuilt, sacrifices were offered, as one would expect, for all twelve tribes of Israel (Ezra 6:13-18). Still, the texts of Scripture are unequivocal. The vast *majority*of northern Israelites were deported by the Assyrians, and “only Judah was left” (2 Kings 17:18), and the writer of Chronicles himself records that they remained in exile in the north even in his own day (1 Chron 5:26).We should not assume that those who returned to Judea and Jerusalem were unaware of their Israelite brothers and sisters from the northern tribes. There are clear indications in the later prophetic portions of Scripture that the Judeans knew precisely where the other tribes were located. For example, the place names in Isaiah 66:19 (Lydia, Tubal, Greece) clearly show that these tribes had already migrated *northwest* into Asia Minor and Europe. This evidence accords precisely with what we learn from the Assyrian inscriptions, as we will see.**Historical and Literary References**Jewish literature that survives from the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods unanimously testifies that the northern Ten Tribes of Israel remained in Exile far to the north, scattered among the Gentiles. There are many references but a small sample will suffice for this article. First, there are those texts which scholars know as the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, most of which were written from 300 BCE into the 1st century of our era. The *Testament of Moses*says:Then *some* from the tribes will go up and come to their appointed place and once again surround the place with walls [referring to the 539BCE return from Babylon]. And the *two tribes* will continue in the faith appointed for them.... And the *ten tribes* will be fruitful and increase among the Gentiles during the time of their captivity (4:7-9; cf. 2:5).Here one sees that a clear distinction is made between the *two* (Judah and probably Levi) and the other *ten*. *2 Esdras* is even more explicit, stating that those exiled by the Assyrians were taken first across the Euphrates, but subsequently migrated far beyond:But they formed this plan for themselves, that they would leave the multitude of the nations and go to a more distant region....a journey of a year and a half; and that country is called Arzareth [meaning, Another Land] (13:39-45).Texts such as *Ben Sirach* (36:11-15), the *Psalms of Solomon* (17:28-31), and the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs* imply a similar dispersion, long after the Babylonian return. Josephus, the first century historian, records much the same:Wherefore there are but *two tribes*[those known as Jews] 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* 11.133).This testimony of Josephus is of particular value in that he is a direct descendant of a priestly family which returned under Ezra and could trace his genealogy back to that time. In his history of the Jewish nation he made use of all the available sources in his day. Had there been a general understanding that the northern Tribes of Israel had returned to the Land in the 6th century BCE he would have certainly recorded this.**Archaeological Evidence**It is at this point that the archaeological evidence becomes most crucial for following the subsequent history of these migrating Israelite exiles. Over the past century a massive amount of inscription evidence has been literally dug up from the ruins of the cities of Mesopotamia, documenting the history of the Assyrian and Babylonian periods. This includes monuments, reliefs, and literally thousands of clay tablets, many of which have only been published in recent years. Not only do we now have contemporaneous accounts of the destruction and deportation of northern Israel, but we are able for the first time to actually trace the migrations of the Israelite captives into the regions north of the Caucasus and across the Bosporus strait into southern Europe. In the earliest Assyrian monuments the Israelites are referred to as the “House of Omri (*Bit Khumri*),” after Omri, king of Israel and father of the wicked Ahab, of the 9th century BCE. Actual correspondence from the court of Sennacherib and Sargon has survived, and it is within such materials that one can begin to pick up references to the Israelites, who were referred to as Gamira or Gamera, and finally as *Cimmerians*, living in the very areas where the Israelite deportees were taken.[(3)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn3) The subsequent history of the Cimmerians, their migrations into Asia Minor and southern Europe, and their relationship to the Scythians, is beyond the scope of this article, but has been thoroughly documented. Suffice it to say at this point that this aspect of our evidence, in combination with the Biblical, the literary, and the prophetic, is part of a whole, and forms an impressive demonstration that approaches historical certainty.**The Rabbinic Position**The rabbis have much to say about the “lost” Ten Tribes, and discussions about their whereabouts and their eventual return to the Land of Israel abound in Jewish sources.[(4)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn4) It is interesting to note that the main discussion in the Mishnah begins with the assertion that “the Ten Tribes will *not* return” (*b. Sanhedrin* 110b). In other words, the idea that the Ten Tribes had assimilated with Judah, the Jewish people, or had otherwise returned to the Land, is *not even* entertained. The whole discussion, which all the rabbis accept, assumes that these tribes are “lost” or in Exile, the pertinent question was *whether*they would ever return, given their extreme state of apostasy. Rabbi Akiba maintained they would not return, while Rabbi Eleizer held that they would. Both interpretations are based on different interpretations of Biblical prophecy, and whether the promises of restoration were conditional or unconditional. The *halachah* (authoritative decision) was that the Ten Tribes*would*return (*Tosefta* *Sanhedrin* 13). Indeed, some rabbinic authorities even held that the return of the Ten Tribes was an essential component of the Redemption. The *Yalkut Shimoni* asserts that even those of the tribes who have lost their identity will come back in the days of the Messiah, when their *origins* and *tribal affiliations* will be revealed.According to the rabbinic sages, the Ten Tribes migrated from Assyria, beyond the River Sambatyon. They report that this mysterious river flows six days a week but stops on the Sabbath (*Genesis Rabba* 11:5). Most have taken this reference to be legendary, however John Hulley has argued that the tradition actually refers to the Bosporus strait, between the Black and Aegean Seas, where the current actually does slow down or even reverse itself on the average of once a week.[(5)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn5) He presents linguistic evidence that the very term Sambatyon comes from “*yam Bithyon*” or “sea of the Bithynians.”[(6)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn6) If this be the case, we have an amazing correlation with the evidence on the migrations of the Cimmerians, indicating that significant portions of the Israelite deportees moved *northwesterly*, into Asia Minor and eventually toward Europe.**The Sure Word of Prophecy**For those who believe that the words of the Hebrew Prophets are inspired by God, perhaps the *strongest* evidence that the Ten Tribes never returned, that they are not to be found among the Jewish people today, but that they will eventually be identified and restored, lies here—in the Bible itself. The problem is that many, if not most, Bible students, both Christian and Jewish, read over passage after passage that clearly refers to the Ten Tribes as if it were referring to the House of Judah, or those we know today as the Jewish people. As we have seen, the Jewish people today obviously contain *some*mixture from the other tribes, but they are predominately from Judah, Levi, and Benjamin. When the Prophets speak of Joseph, or Ephraim, which they do many times, this is clearly *not*a reference to the Jewish people and often stands in the same context with some explicit contrasting statement about Judah (the Jews). There are two major points which must be emphasized here.First, the Prophets clearly declare that the ultimate restoration of the Ten Tribes, and their *union* with Judah will come in “the last days,” coinciding with the appearance of the Davidic messianic figure. That time is described in such a way as to make clear that it could *not* *possibly* refer to the return of Judah from the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE. For example, Jeremiah 30-31, one of the most explicit prophecies in the Bible dealing with the Tribes, is framed with the statement “in the latter days you will understand this” (Jer 30:24). In case one might wonder or dispute the precise meaning of this phrase, “the latter days,” Jeremiah makes it clear that it is the time when the LORD (YHVH) removes the yoke of foreign domination and raises up a Davidic descendant to be king in Israel (30:9). This corresponds to a time when Jerusalem will be rebuilt, *never to be uprooted or demolished again* (Jer 31:37-40). Since Jerusalem was utterly demolished by the Romans in 70 CE, subsequent to the return from Babylonian Exile under Ezra and Nehemiah, this particular union and restoration of all Israel— including that of the Land, the City, and the Temple—must be one yet *in the future*, in the days of the Messianic Kingdom. Amos makes the same point at the end of his prophecy. The Northern Kingdom is to be destroyed, scattered, but not lost (9:8-9)—yet in a latter time the Davidic “tabernacle” will be restored (9:11), and Israel will be planted back in their own land, “*never* *again* to be uprooted” (9:15). Since Judah *was* uprooted again by the Romans following the return from Babylon, and since the Davidic dynasty was not restored during the time of that Return, this prophecy, like that of Jeremiah 30-31, *must* refer to a subsequent time. Ezekiel 37 speaks of both the valley of dry bones and the union of the two “sticks” (or “trees”/ $[e). These two Sticks are clearly identified as that of Joseph (and “his companions,” i.e., the Ten Tribes) and Judah. This important prophecy is obviously set in the same messianic time period, one clearly *yet future* to us, and could not have been fulfilled in 2nd Temple times (5th century BCE through 1st century CE). The latter verses of the chapter make this clear. The *union* of the two sticks comes at a time when the Davidic messianic figure appears and the holy Sanctuary or Temple is restored *permanently* (37:24-28). Further, as the following two chapters show, this is just preceding the wars of Gog and Magog. To apply Ezekiel 37 to any time in the past is to rob it of any sensible meaning. Isaiah 11 is perhaps the clearest single prophecy which absolutely *pinpoints* the time of the union of the Ten Tribes with the House of Judah. It is set at a time when the messianic Branch of David will rule the earth. At that time the LORD (YHVH), through this messianic agent, extends His hand *a second time* [not the Babylonian Return] to recover the exiles of both Israel and Judah (verses 10-12). These Scriptures: Jeremiah 30-31; Amos 9; Ezekiel 37; and Isaiah 11, are representative of an entire mesh of related texts, all of which correlate perfectly with one another. The Prophets offer us an incredibly vivid picture of the Last Days, and central to their vision is this coming union of the “lost” tribes of Joseph and his companions, with those we know today as the Jewish people.The second major point which stands out most starkly in the Prophets is the absolutely staggering *scope* of the future Restoration of all the Tribes. It is to rival the Exodus from Egypt, according to Jeremiah:However, the days are coming declares the LORD (YHVH), when men will no longer say, As the LORD (YHVH) lives who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt, but they will say, As the LORD (YHVH) lives who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of *all the countries*where he had banished them. For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers (Jer 16:14-15).Lest anyone doubt the context, the passage is repeated in Jeremiah 23:7-8 where it is connected tightly to the Davidic messiah and his reign (verses 5-6). The language could not be plainer. Jeremiah 3:11-18 also adds further details regarding this coming Restoration. At that time, Jerusalem will become the center of a world government, to which all the nations will flock, precisely when “the House of Judah will join the House of Israel and together they will come from a northern land.” This text in turn correlates with Isaiah 2:2-4, which tells of a time of universal peace with all nations coming to Jerusalem to learn the Torah Way of the LORD (YHVH). Clearly then, when the Ten Tribes return, and are joined with the Jewish people, the *entire* world will be transformed. By no stretch of language or imagination can any of these texts be applied to the hopeful but limited return of the Jews from Babylon in 586 BCE.It has been our experience that those who maintain that the Jewish people today represent the fulfillment of the Biblical prophecies regarding the restoration of ALL Israel have usually not *carefully* read the many portions of Scripture dealing with that Restoration.[(7)](http://www.unitedisrael.org/ten-tribes-israel-ever-lost.html#fn7) These texts make it very plain that a great awakening lies yet ahead of us, one that will usher in the Messianic Era.**The “Lost Tribes” and Racism**From the very first, this web site has made it clear to our readers that United Israel of Jerusalem rejects any type of *Racist*approach in its attempts to identify the Lost Tribes. We do not maintain that any countries today, such as the United States or Britain, *are* Israelite, or that modern nations are to be identified with certain tribes, such as Manasseh or Ephraim. As we have repeatedly stressed, the research we are beginning to present on the Lost Tribes, will be historically responsible so that it can stand up to the most rigorous academic scrutiny. Too many of the groups who espouse the “Israel Identity” message produce so-called “proof” and “evidence” that is laughable to competent linguists, ethnographers, and historians. And, to make things worse, they often tend to be subtly, or even not so subtly, *racist* in their approach to this question of identifying the Lost Tribes. Clearly the populations of Britian, the United States, and northwestern Europe are very mixed. What we maintain is that significant portions of the ancient Israelites ended up in these areas. Identifying them, at this time, is not *scientifically* possible.Obviously, we do maintain that the Abrahamic seed, the very *bloodline* through Isaac and Jacob, is significant. The Biblical texts make it clear that it will truly be those descendants of the ancient Israelites who will return to the Land of Israel and usher in the Messianic Age. However, in terms of actual identification, for now at least, *IT IS A MATTER OF THE HEART*! Admittedly, this sounds highly subjective and imprecise. However, the experiences of thousands of Biblically-oriented, mostly Protestant, believers provide convincing testimony in this regard. We have begun, on this web site, to present some striking evidence of the affinity these special people have with the God of Israel, the Bible, and the Jewish people (see “A Coincidental Historical Parallel?”).There is much more evidence to come, and it will continue to be presented systematically. We have lived to witness in our own day a tremendous *RETURN*on the part of thousands of Christians toward a recovery of the Hebraic roots of their faith. Many find it absolutely *irresistible*. There is a reason for this! It is truly a matter of the heart, but the prophets foretell just such a thing, how one from a city, and two from a family, will be brought back to Zion in the latter days. We are highly privileged to witness not only the birth of the modern State of Israel in our century, but the identification and the beginnings of a restoration of the Lost Tribes.(1) The translation of the latter part of this verse is difficult. It might also mean, “He settled them *on the Habor*, the river of Gozan” (see NRSV, NIV). The parallel account in 1 Chronicles 5:26 names “Halah, Habor, Hara, and the *river* Gozan,” indicating that the name of the river is Gozan, *not* the Habor, a tributary that runs into the Euphrates.(2) Immanuel Velikovsky maintained that the tribes were taken much farther north, even beyond the Caucasus, to the steppes of the Don and Volga rivers, an area he argues the Assyrians reached. He identifies the “Gozan” river with the Volga, and the Khazars with the ancient Israelites (*The Assyrian Conquest*, Vol. II of the *Ages in Chaos*series).(3) For readers wishing to pursue this area in greater detail, we mention two publications, one popular and the other more scholarly: E. Raymond Capt, *Missing Links Discovered in Assyrian Tablets* (Artisan Sales, P. O. Box 1497, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360) and Anne Kristensen, *Who Were The Cimmerians and Where Did They Come From?*(Copenhagen: Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters, 1988).(4) A good published summary is found in Rabbi Rafael Eisenberg, *A Matter of Return* (Jerusalem: Feldheim, 1980). The major rabbinic discussion is found in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 110b.(5) Bosporus (bòs-per-es), strait, c. 20 mi (30 km) long and c. 2,100 ft (640 m) wide at its narrowest, separating European and Asian Turkey. The fortified strait connects the Black Sea with the Sea of Marmara. As a part (with the DARDANELLES) of a passage linking the BLACK and MEDITERRANEAN seas, it is a critically important shipping lane for Russia and Ukraine. A bridge (3,524 ft/1,074 m long) spans the Bosporus at Istanbul, near the southern end of the strait.(6) See the fascinating article “Did Any of the Lost Tribes go North?” in *B’Or Ha’Torah* 6 (1987): 127-33.(7) See the articles “An Everlasting Love” and “Searching for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel—Separating Fact from Fantasy,” where many of these key texts are covered. |

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