

The Lost Tribes of Israel: Lost No More

It reads like a modern-day suspense movie screenplay.

A mysterious tribe in a remote corner of the world makes an astonishing claim about its members' historic identity. Ostracized by their neighbors, these lowly outcasts stubbornly insist they're descended from the world's most storied race of people—the Israelites.

Skeptical investigators discover an ancient heritage of names, words and idioms foreign to any local tongue but do indeed bear a striking resemblance to Hebraic ones. They also observe rituals and traditions seemingly right out of the first five books of the Old Testament.

Even so, these astonishing assertions are dismissed by most as too fantastic to be true—until cutting-edge breakthroughs in genetic analysis suddenly added scientific credence to their claims.

This isn't fiction. Indeed, in recent years this very scenario has been playing out in numerous unlikely spots in far-flung corners of the world—from Africa, to India and even China. These extraordinary developments represent an emerging solution to one of antiquity's deepest and long-standing mysteries.

Namely, "What happened to 'the Lost Tribes of Israel?'"

What is more, these discoveries seem to represent a stunning fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

How 10 Tribes Got Lost

To understand the origin of the Lost Tribes mystery, one must have a grasp of two historical facts.

The first is that the original 12-tribe kingdom of Israel—founded under King Saul and expanded under the rule of David and his son Solomon—was ultimately split into two nations after Solomon’s death. Ten tribes formed the northern kingdom (varyingly referred to by the Old Testament prophets as “Israel” or “Ephraim”), while the remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin became the southern kingdom (which the prophets simply called “Judah”), with Jerusalem as its capital.

Secondly, it’s important to know that the northern kingdom was ultimately invaded and completely conquered by the Assyrian Empire in 722 B.C.

Whenever the Assyrians conquered a nation, it was their practice to forcibly relocate most of the conquered people to other portions of their vast empire—and to settle that area with other conquered people. This served to make a future rebellion against Assyrian authority far less likely. The assumption was the vanquished people would ultimately be assimilated—racially, culturally and religiously—into the nations to which they were scattered. And in most cases, that is precisely what happened.

But the Israelites are not just any ethnic or cultural group in history. They were—and are—a people hand-selected and engineered by God Himself to be stubbornly resistant to assimilation. And as we’re about to discover, that resistance is astonishingly strong and persistent.

Roughly 135 years after the fall of the northern kingdom, Judah was also conquered. The Babylonians, which had by that time replaced the Assyrians as the dominant world empire, carried all the best and brightest of the Judean kingdom into captivity. After 70 years, what the Bible calls a “remnant” of those captives returned to Judah to rebuild and restore the devastated nation—including the rebuilding of the temple. But there is no record in the Bible of the Northern Tribes ever returning.

So, if only a remnant of the Judean captives returned to Judah, what happened to the other members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin—the ones who stayed behind and made the vast Babylonian Empire their permanent home?

And what of the Jews who remained in Israel following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70 and the final revolt against the Romans in A.D. 136? They too were banished from their land and scattered to the nations of the world and became known as the diaspora, or dispersion.

The Wanderers

Prior to all of these events, God had explicitly warned Israel that if they were not faithful to obey His laws and commandments, He would banish them from their land to wander the nations: “The Lord will scatter you among all the peoples, from the one end of the earth to the other” (Deut. 28:64).

This indeed came to pass. The descendants of Jacob have been scattered to almost every nation on earth. But in His mercy and faithfulness, God also promised the day would come when He would bring them back: “When all these things happen to you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you remember them among all the nations, where the Lord your God has driven you, then you must return to the Lord your God and obey His voice according to all that I am commanding you today, you and your children, with all your heart, and with all your soul. Then the Lord your God will overturn your captivity and have compassion on you and will return and gather you from all the nations, where the Lord your God has scattered you” (Deut. 30:1-3).

I believe we are living in those days of restoration. The fact is, while the remnants of these tribes have been lost to the world for centuries, God has known all along where they are. As I mentioned above, He designed them to be very resistant to assimilation. Indeed, many of these ancient Jewish communities

are now coming to light and being recognized by Israel.

Each of these in many respects fit the narrative described in my opening paragraphs. They and their ancestors have been following distinctly Jewish traditions for centuries, and some have been genetically linked to the Jewish people. Here are just a few exciting examples:

The Bnei Menashe of India

Near the border between eastern India and Myanmar are the two Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram. Within these states lives an ancient community called the Bnei Menashe, believed to be descended from the lost tribe of Manasseh. The oral history of the tribe holds that they were captured by Assyria along with the rest of the Northern Tribes of Israel and eventually landed in China. Then, in the second century, they migrated to India in the wake of Chinese persecution. Many converted to Christianity in the 19th century through the work of Welsh Presbyterian missionaries.

In 2011, the Israeli government decided to allow 7,300 members of the Bnei Menashe to come to Israel. Several hundred more have also recently made aliyah, the immigration of Jews to Israel, but thousands still remain and live in a state of deep poverty.

The Lemba of Zimbabwe

God made good on His promise to scatter the children of Israel to the uttermost parts of the world. Perhaps nowhere is that more evidenced than in the remote bush of Zimbabwe, where we've often had to wait to land our seven-seater prop plane until zebras exited the clearing we use as a makeshift runway.

Here we've found the Lemba, a tribe numbering more than 70,000 and spread throughout Zimbabwe and parts of South Africa.

In a recent DNA study, 70 percent of the Lemba sampled

possessed the Cohanim gene, a higher percentage than both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews sampled. This finding has generated significant interest among the Jewish community and strongly supports their 800-year claim to be descendants of the high priest Aaron.

The Jews of Ethiopia

The nation referred to as “Cush” in the Scriptures is almost certainly modern-day Ethiopia. Isaiah prophetically named the nations from which God will regather His scattered people in the last days: “In that day the Lord shall set His hand again the second time to recover the remnant of His people, who shall be left, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the islands of the sea” (Is. 11:11).

According to local ancient traditions, Ethiopia’s Jewish connection goes back to the time of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. A 14th-century document known as the Kebra Nagast (The Glory of the Kings) records that Solomon and Sheba had a son named Menelik I, who later returned to Ethiopia with his family and the ark of the covenant.

Others believe that Jews from the exodus made their way down the Nile and eventually settled in Ethiopia. Most historians, however, believe their presence in Ethiopia is post-exilic and traces back to the Roman dispersion of Jews migrating from Yemen to the horn of Africa.

While the if, when and how of the Jews’ and Judaism’s arrival in Ethiopia are shrouded in mystery, it is nevertheless clear that it happened at some point. For one thing, we have the account of the Ethiopian eunuch encountered by Phillip (Acts 8:26-39), who was led to faith in Yeshua, not as a pagan but as a devout Jew.

We also know that for centuries visitors to Ethiopia have taken note of certain tribes who practice ancient religious

rites very similar to those of Old Testament Israel and who explicitly claim descent from the tribes of Israel. And modern genetic testing has validated those claims.

For example, an Ethiopian group known as the Beta Israel (House of Israel) was officially recognized by the Israeli government in 1973.

Another tribe of Ethiopian Jews, the Beta Avraham, was originally part of the Beta Israel community. But in the 17th century, a false messiah rose up in their midst, who ultimately led them to join the Orthodox Church. They broke away, became their own tribe and eventually settled in the Ethiopian district of Kechene near the capital city of Addis Ababa.

The Gefat—a third offshoot of Ethiopian Jews—live farther south in the Ethiopian countryside of Woliso and Hosanna. A remote community, this tribe (estimated at 20,000-30,000 individuals) have faithfully observed Jewish customs for hundreds of years, including circumcising their male children on the eighth day, applying the blood of a lamb on their doorposts at Passover, and keeping biblical dietary laws. In fact, their name, Gefat, means “the blowers.” According to their oral history, they were chosen by the kings of Ethiopia centuries ago to blow the shofar ahead of the ark of the covenant in official processions.

The existence of this remarkable group and others in Somaliland, Somalia; Afghanistan; and Nigeria pose two questions for those of us who follow Yeshua and strive to obey His Word.

The first is: Does their discovery in our day represent some sort of prophetic sign and signal concerning the end times? And secondly: What is our responsibility to minister to these poor and oppressed sons and daughters of Abraham?

Fulfilled Prophecy

While many rightly view the rebirth of the state of Israel and the re-unification of Jerusalem as key fulfillments of end-time prophecy, too few Christians have taken note of another astonishing prophetic fulfillment unfolding before our eyes. I'm referring to the identification of these various fragments of lost Israelite tribes and the re-gathering of some back to Israel. Isaiah 11:11 reveals that in the last days, God will "reclaim the surviving remnant of His people" from a list of African nations, including Ethiopia—home to many of the Beta Israel.

In my opinion, these are some of the most significant signs of the Messiah's imminent return. I am also convinced that reaching the poorest of these scattered children of Israel with both humanitarian aid and the gospel is a clear and powerful expression of God's heart and will today.

This is why the organization I lead—Jewish Voice Ministries International—has been actively working on both sides of that equation for decades now. We operate with a mandate from Romans 1:16, which says the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." It has been our honor to introduce thousands of these individuals to their long-awaited Messiah while planting, equipping and nurturing numerous new Messianic congregations in these communities.

At the same time we're doing everything we can to address the physical and medical needs of these very poor and frequently persecuted people.

We mounted our first major medical and spiritual outreach back in 1999—blessing the people of the Beta Israel tribe in Gondar, Ethiopia. In the years since, hundreds of dedicated volunteers from congregations around the world have joined us in more than 25 medical outreaches to help impoverished, scattered Israelite remnant communities. By God's grace, we've provided free medical care and medication to more than 275,000

patients. We've distributed 40,000 pairs of eyeglasses, performed nearly 700 eye surgeries, and provided dental treatment to 15,000 patients.

Although we've never made our gospel message a requirement for care, we've always erected a prayer tent—making prayer and ministry available to every person we treat. As a result, God has blessed us with thousands of accepted invitations to receive Yeshua as Messiah and Savior. Obviously, participating in this level of ministry, and to such a remarkable group of people, is more gratifying than I can express. Ministering to these living, miraculous examples of fulfilled prophecy is an extraordinary honor. And it is a blessing I will get to share with scores of new volunteers who will join us on one of our upcoming outreaches. Perhaps you should be among them. {eoa}

Rabbi Jonathan Bernis is president and CEO of Jewish Voice Ministries International, host of the TV show Jewish Voice with Jonathan Bernis and author of A Rabbi Looks at Jesus of Nazareth. For more information, go to .

Discover more about the Menashe tribe, who claim to be a lost tribe of Israel, at .