

Prophetic Fulfillment: Regathering the 'Lost Tribes' of Israel

Since the Assyrians invaded their land and led them into captivity in 722 B.C., the whereabouts of the northern tribes of Israel has remained one of the great mysteries of antiquity. Unlike those in the southern kingdom of Judah, who returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Temple after 70 years in captivity under the Babylonians (586-516 B.C.), there is no record in the Bible of the northern tribes ever returning.

In fact, these "lost tribes of Israel," in a wider sense, include more than just the 10 tribes that vanished from the stage of history after the Assyrians took them captive. Ezra and Nehemiah both relay that only a *remnant* returned to Jerusalem with them from the Babylonian captivity. What happened to the rest of the southern kingdom, members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin? And what of the Jews remaining in Israel following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 A.D. and the final revolt against the Romans in 136 A.D.? They were banished from their land, scattered to the nations of the world and became known as the *diaspora*, or dispersion.

Jews wandered from nation to nation throughout Europe during the Middle Ages as they were expelled from their host nations. Jews living in Italy were banished in 855 A.D. and from England in 1290. During the Spanish Inquisition (1492-97), the Jews of Spain (1492) and later Portugal (1497) were expelled and migrated to the Ottoman Empire, North Africa and the Netherlands. Many also ended up in South and Central America and are known today as Marranos, Conversos or Anusim (translated "retrained ones").

Commerce also played a role in Jewish migration into other nations of the world. Merchants in search of treasures from the Middle East established trade routes into Asia and Africa. One of the most famous of these was the "Silk Road," a 4,000-mile trek that connected silk traders in China with consumers in the Middle East. This route brought Persian Jews and other Jewish merchants into China. By the year 1200, there was a thriving Jewish community in Kaifeng until a flood of the Yellow River in 1850 destroyed their synagogue.

I had the opportunity to travel to Kaifeng on an outreach led by my good friend Sid Roth back in 1995 to scout out the Jewish community remaining there. Although we only met a handful of these Chinese Jews, this trip led me on a journey that has continued to this day—searching out and working to aid and restore the scattered children of Israel. The experience has felt like an Indiana Jones adventure, but instead of searching for the lost *Ark* of the Covenant, I have been in search of the lost *people* of the Covenant. This quest has since taken me to some of the most remote areas of the world.

God 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 one end of the earth to the other" (Deut. 28:64).

Indeed, this 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).

While these tribes may be lost to the world, God knows who and where each one of them is. I believe we are living in those days of restoration. Indeed, many of these Jewish communities are now coming to light and being recognized by the State of Israel.

The Jews of Ethiopia

Isaiah 11:11 says, “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.”

What’s referred to as Cush in the ancient Scriptures is likely modern-day Ethiopia. According to ancient tradition, 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 up 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. Whatever history is correct, we do have the account of Phillip’s encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39), who was led to faith not from paganism but from Judaism.

Known as the Beta Israel (House of Israel), the Ethiopian Jews were officially recognized by the State of Israel in 1973. In fact, the Israeli government conducted two dangerous

operations to bring them to Israel: Operation Moses, which took place over a period of seven weeks in 1984-85, during which 8,000 Ethiopian Jews were brought to Israel. Operation Solomon, a covert airlift, was conducted in 1991 and brought 14,500 Ethiopian Jews to Israel over a 24-hour period. Sadly, thousands of the Beta Israel identified as Falasha Mura (converts to Christianity) were left behind.

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 among these people and ultimately led them to join the Orthodox Church. They broke away, becoming their own tribe and eventually settled in the Ethiopian district of Kechene, near the capital city of Addis Ababa. Jewish Voice brings a team of medical doctors and volunteers to help this community every year and operates a full-time medical clinic known as Bete Hibret.

A third offshoot of Ethiopian Jews, the Gefat, lives farther south in the Ethiopian rural countryside of Woliso and Hosanna. A remote community made up of 20,000 to 30,000 people, this tribe has faithfully observed Jewish customs for hundreds of years, including circumcising their male children on the eighth day, applying the blood of a lamb over 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.

I became aware of this community in 2010 when their elders contacted me during one of our medical clinic outreaches in Addis Ababa and asked for our help. The following year we held our first medical outreach in Woliso. Thousands came for treatment, and we’ve returned regularly ever since.

To date, Jewish Voice has planted and supports a flourishing network of eight Messianic Jewish congregations in Ethiopia,

all of which are experiencing rapid growth.

The Bnei Menashe of India

Near the border between eastern India and Myanmar are the two Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram. Within these lives an ancient community called the Bnei Menashe, believed to be descended from the lost tribe of Manasseh. Oral history 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 2008, a rat infestation completely overtook the rice crops in Mizoram, threatening starvation. This famine drew global media attention to the Bnei Menashe. When I heard of their plight, I felt the Lord strongly prompting me to do something to help. After an advance trip to assess the needs, we provided hundreds of tons of rice and brought a large team of doctors and dentists to provide free medical, dental and eye care to the Bnei Menashe. We've been back every year since. More than 900 members of the Bnei Menashe have prayed with our prayer teams to receive Jesus as their Messiah.

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* (going up to the Holy Land), 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 six-seater prop plane until zebras exited the clearing we use as a makeshift runway.

Here we've found the Lemba, a tribe numbering over 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 (from an ancient Jewish priestly line)—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 Aaron the high priest.

After a whirlwind trip—spent mostly on planes—to meet with the Lemba's elders, we organized our first medical outreach to their community in 2012. Without electricity, hotels or restaurants, we had to truck in the entire clinic on washed-out dirt roads—including tents and the generators needed to power our medical equipment. Since this first outreach two years ago, we now have 30 Messianic Jewish congregations among the Lemba with a weekly attendance of over 3,000. The Lemba are currently the fastest-growing Messianic Jewish community in the world.

The Yibir of Somaliland

Through a dear friend, Gerald Gotzen, I heard about a mystical tribe of people in Somaliland called the Yibir. The Yibir—whose name, some believe, derives from the word *Hebrew*—were forced to convert to Islam many years ago yet have secretly retained their Jewish identity. In 2012, I sent an advance team to Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland to meet with tribal leaders. They quietly shared about their Jewish ancestry and their desire to further connect with their Jewish identity and the State of Israel. We've continued to develop our relationship and are seeking ways to help them in this pursuit.

The Pashtun of Afghanistan

Within the borders of Afghanistan, one of the most uniformly Muslim countries in the world, lives an ethnic group called

the Pashtun who some believe to be descendants of one of the 10 lost tribes. The Pashtun are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. Though DNA testing has been inconclusive and scholars have disagreed for centuries as to their true origins, it's indisputable that the Pashtun do observe certain ancient Jewish customs and traditions. Many historic markers in the region are written in Aramaic (the language of first-century Judaism) instead of the traditional Sanskrit usually found in this area.

Many of the family names among the Pashtun are Jewish as well, including Levani (similar to Levi), Daftani (similar to Naphtali) and Jaji (similar to Gad). Some historians, as far back as the 1800s, even referred to the Pashtuns as "Yusefzai," meaning sons of Joseph.

The Igbo of Nigeria

In the central-western African country of Nigeria lives a tribe of the Igbo people who call themselves the Bnei Yisrael. They believe themselves to be descended from the lost tribes of Gad, Zebulun, Manasseh, Dan, Asher and Naphtali. Numbering some 30,000, the Bnei Yisrael observe many biblical feasts and maintain the dietary laws and other commandments of the Torah.

We just completed a scouting trip to meet with the leaders of the Bnei Yisrael and plans are under way to conduct our first outreach in Nigeria next year.

The Jew First

While many rightly view the rebirth of the State of Israel and restoration of Jerusalem as important fulfillments of last days' prophecy, too few Christians are paying attention to other prophetic events taking place before our eyes. Among these are the large numbers of Jewish people coming to faith in Jesus as their Messiah; the rise and growth of the Messianic Jewish movement; and the regathering of these "lost

tribes" back to their homeland. In my opinion, these are some of the most significant signs of Messiah's soon return.

In Romans 1:16 we are told that the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first" (emphasis mine). While some teach this is simply a fact of history and nothing more, I believe this is a biblical principle that is still in force today. In fact, it may be the missing key to our missiology. Is it possible that reaching the Jewish people opens the door to the salvation of the nations? Perhaps this is the mystery that Paul was revealing to us in Romans 11:15 when he declared, "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"

So how are we applying this missiological view and reaching the "lost tribes" of Israel with an end-times perspective in mind? Since our first medical clinic in Gondar, Ethiopia, in 1999, hundreds of dedicated volunteers from church communities around the world have worked with Jewish Voice in more than 20 medical-clinic outreaches to help impoverished Jewish communities. By God's grace, we've provided free medical care and medicines to more than 211,000 patients. We've distributed 37,000 pairs of eyeglasses, performed nearly 700 eye surgeries and provided dental treatment to 13,000 patients.

While these statistics are wonderful, it's the spiritual message and outcome that is most important. Everything we do to physically help these people is with the end goal of earning the right to share our faith and demonstrating that we care. I often repeat the adage to the volunteers who work with us that "people don't care what you know until they know that you care."

Each of our outreaches features a prayer tent, where patients can pray with members of our team and hear about a God who loves them and sent His Son to die for them. We don't force anyone to enter these tents—our medical help is truly free—but

we rejoice when they do. And the practical aid has paid off. Our teams have prayed with 38,644 to receive Yeshua as their Messiah and Savior. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, people of all walks of life have responded. We've also witnessed thousands supernaturally healed, delivered and filled with the Spirit of God. We've seen patients enter the prayer tent on their knees and walk out on their feet. We've seen the deaf hear, the blind see and the lame carried in and walk out!

Lost No More

God's preservation and regathering of the dispersed of Israel is a testimony of His faithfulness. As Jeremiah 31:35-36 declares, "Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for a light by day and the ordinances of the moon and of the stars for a light by night, who stirs up the sea so that the waves roar, the Lord of Hosts is His name: 'If those ordinances depart from before Me,' says the Lord, 'then the seed of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever.'"

He has sustained His people through famine, dispersion, persecution and attempted genocide. While they may be "lost" to the world, God knows where they are ... and He is actively regathering them before our watching eyes. He is not only restoring them physically to their land, He is restoring them spiritually through His Son.

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. See .*

Jonathan Bernis shares how one of Israel's lost tribes has been discovered and ministered to in Ethiopia at .