

Israel: Past

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Prophecy—everyone has his own interpretation of Bible prophecy. Some ignore it altogether, rejecting it as "confusing," "irrelevant," or "worthless." Many, even among "mainstream Christians," lump it with Nostradamus and Edgar Cayce, while evangelicals delve into it with fervor. Few are indifferent to it.

To the church of God, prophecy is a major area of study, speculation and hope. Herbert W. Armstrong often repeated that the Bible is nearly one-third prophecy, and he preached on prophecy at least that often in his sermons, radio broadcasts and telecasts. The church published dozens of booklets and even a book on prophecy.

This particular book, *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, clinched the calling of many church members. When we grasped the principles of where America and Britain fit in God's plan for mankind and His blueprint of it in the prophecies, something clicked. This book made us say, "Now I understand!" We finally had the key to unlock the mystery of Bible prophecy.

Of course, the key is the identity of Israel among modern nations. This—along with the identity of the church, the road map of God's holy days and the realization that this is the time of the end—opens the prophecies of God's Word in a way unknown to earlier ages. In itself, this fulfills the prophecy of Daniel 12:4, 9-10:

But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book until the time of the end; many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase. . . . And [the man clothed in linen] said, "Go your way, Daniel, for the words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end. Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand."

Lest we forget this all-important principle in understanding Bible prophecy, we need to review the biblical basis of our belief that Israelites can be found in the English-speaking nations and northwestern Europe. To limit the scope of this topic, we will avoid the historical, cultural and linguistic evidence (which is constantly mounting). Instead, we will follow the Bible's clues and allow it to interpret itself, for as Peter says,

We also have the prophetic word made more sure, which you do well to heed . . . ; knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:19-21)

The Patriarchs

Knowing Israel's story—and realizing its ramifications—is the first step in understanding this key of prophecy. Many scholars, though they know Israel's history intimately, fail to put the salient facts together to arrive at the truth. How true it is, as Benjamin Franklin wrote, "for the want of a nail . . . the rider was lost"!

The history of Israel technically begins with Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. In fact, he was at least in his nineties when God changed his name to Israel (Genesis 32:28)! His descendants thus became known as "Israelites." This also means that before this time, no Israelite had ever existed! Even Abraham and Isaac were not Israelites or Jews; they were Hebrews (descendants of Eber; Genesis 11:14).

Realistically, though, Israel's national history begins with God's calling of Abraham to emigrate from Mesopotamia to Canaan (Genesis 12:1-4). God promised to make of him "a great nation" (verse 2), though he and his wife, Sarah, were childless. After many years and trials, they bore Isaac, the promised son (Genesis 21:1-7). However, God called upon Abraham to sacrifice his only son on Mount Moriah, and in great faith in God's promises, Abraham and Isaac did as God commanded (Genesis 22:1-10). At the last moment, God intervened, due to Abraham's faith and obedience (verses 11-12).

Because of this, God repeated and broadened His promises (verses 15-18). No longer were there any *ifs* attached to them; they were now unconditional! Abraham's descendants would multiply beyond counting and "possess the gate of their enemies" (verse 17). Most importantly, God promised that from Abraham would spring the Messiah, who would be a blessing to all nations (verse 18). These promises were later repeated to Isaac (Genesis 26:3-5) and Jacob (Genesis 27:26-29; 28:3-4, 13-14; 35:11-12).

Jacob fathered twelve sons by four women, and these twelve became the forebears of the twelve tribes of Israel. The firstborn, Reuben, lost his status as primary heir because of his sexual misconduct (Genesis 35:22; I Chronicles 5:1). Along with the patriarchal blessing, Jacob split the inheritance into two parts: the scepter and the birthright.

The scepter—that is, the right to rule over the other tribes—went to Judah, his fourth son (Genesis 49:10-11; I Chronicles 5:2). With the scepter came the promise of the Messiah, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Revelation 5:5). Only Judah's descendants are rightfully called "Jews."

Jacob bestowed the birthright—that is, the "double portion" of inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17)—and the patriarchal blessing on Joseph, his eleventh son (Genesis 48:8-20, 22; 49:22-26; I Chronicles 5:2). However, Jacob did something unusual in blessing Joseph: He adopted Joseph's two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, placing Ephraim, the younger, ahead of the firstborn, Manasseh. The descendants of these two adopted sons of Israel are sometimes called "half-tribes," as they each comprise half of the tribe of Joseph.

From Egypt to Canaan

Because of severe famine, Jacob and his sons migrated to Egypt where Joseph, now Egypt's prime minister, provided them with land in Goshen (Genesis 46:1-47:12). While Joseph lived, the Israelites prospered and multiplied there, but not long after he died, new rulers arose in Egypt and enslaved them (Exodus 1:7-14).

The Israelites suffered horribly under their taskmasters. They cried out to God for relief and deliverance, and He called upon Moses, a Levite raised in the court of Pharaoh, to bring them out of

bondage (Exodus 2:1-10; Acts 7:20-22; Hebrews 11:23-27). After ten devastating plagues (Exodus 7:14-11:9; 12:29-30), God caused Pharaoh to grant the Israelites leave (Exodus 12:31-32). Amazingly, God even allowed them to collect their back wages when they spoiled the Egyptians (verses 35-36)!

As a final sign of His displeasure, God destroyed Egypt's army at the Red Sea, while the Israelites crossed over on dry land (Exodus 14). As Israel journeyed in the wilderness to the Promised Land, God provided Israel with food and drink, while their shoes and clothing did not wear out (Deuteronomy 8:3-4, 15-16).

Within several weeks, God led them to Mount Sinai, where He instructed the people about His law and made a covenant with them (Exodus 19-24). This covenant bound Israel to follow God's way of life as an example to the rest of the world (Exodus 19:6), and God agreed to bless them if they obeyed Him (Exodus 23:20-31).

While at Mount Sinai, Israel constructed the Tabernacle and its implements. God also appointed Aaron and his progeny as priests and made the Sabbath a perpetual covenant between Himself and His people (Exodus 25-31, 34-40). Here, too, the Israelites committed idolatry with the Golden Calf, showing they had not really accepted their part in the covenant (Exodus 32). Already, Israel began to demonstrate the pattern they would follow repeatedly throughout its history, a constant cycle of zeal for God, apostasy, punishment and deliverance (Judges 2:7, 10-19).

After forty years (c. 1446-1406 BC; all dates taken from *A Survey of Israel's History* by Leon J. Wood, 1986), Joshua, Moses' successor, led them into Canaan, where they conquered much—but not all—of the land God had promised them (Joshua 3:20-4:6). For the next 3½ centuries (c. 1390-1050 BC), the Israelites were ruled by judges, leaders God raised up to deliver Israel from oppressors. From Othniel to Samuel, Israel showed the results of "everyone [doing] what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Monarchy and Captivity

When Samuel was old, the Israelites clamored for "a king to judge us like all the nations" (I Samuel 8:5). God gave them Saul (c. 1050-1010 BC), a strong, tall, handsome Benjamite, who soon showed his true colors. God rejected him (I Samuel 15:10-29) in favor of a young Jew named David (I Samuel 16:1-13). When Saul died, David took up the scepter, as had been promised.

At this time, it becomes apparent that the tribes of Israel were divided between two "houses": Israel, made up of ten tribes living in the northern areas of Palestine and led by the half-tribes of Joseph; and Judah, comprised of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and most of Levi. Judah took David as its king, but Israel chose Ishbosheth, Saul's son, as their king (II Samuel 2:1-11). Civil war resulted, with David eventually gaining the upper hand (II Samuel 3:1; 5:1-5). Soon thereafter, David conquered seemingly impregnable Jerusalem and made it his capital (II Samuel 5:6-12).

When David proved his obedience, God made a tremendous, eternal promise to him: David's house, kingdom and throne were established forever (II Samuel 7:16; Psalm 89:35-37). This is an addendum to the scepter promise made to Judah (see Psalm 78:67-71), and will ultimately be fulfilled in Jesus Christ's rule as King of kings and Lord of lords (Luke 1:30-33; Revelation 1:5; 5:5; 19:16). Further, Jeremiah 33:17 makes very plain that David's dynasty would perpetually rule "the house of Israel," not just Judah.

During his reign (c. 1010-970 BC), David conquered all the territories from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River, making him the undisputed ruler of the area (I Kings 4:24). These lands—and hegemony over other nearby lands—he passed on to Solomon, who enjoyed a prosperous and peaceful reign (c. 970-931 BC) over what can correctly be called an Israelite Empire (I Kings 4:20-34). The high-mark of his reign was the building and dedication of God's Temple in Jerusalem (I Kings 5-8).

After Solomon died (c. 931 BC), the house of Israel rebelled against David's line, establishing their own monarchy under Jeroboam (I Kings 12:1-20). Soon, Israel fell into idolatry, rejected the Levites and broke God's Sabbaths (verses 25-33; Ezekiel 20). In just over two hundred years, Assyria had conquered Israel and captured many of its people (c. 722 BC; II Kings 17:5-23).

As a whole, the house of Israel never returned to Palestine. During the reign of Josiah, an army of Scythians, as historians identify some post-captivity Israelites, conquered and resettled their ancestral lands (see II Chronicles 34:6, 9, 33; 35:17-18). However, history shows that they soon returned to the main body of Israelites living near the Caspian Sea.

Judah fared better under a succession of 19 kings and one queen, many of whom tried to follow God's laws. However, idolatry and Sabbath-breaking caught up to them as well, and they fell to the Babylonians after a series of invasions that lasted from 604 to 586 BC (II Kings 24-25). After a captivity of 70 years in Babylon, the house of Judah was allowed to return to Palestine by Cyrus, king of Persia (c. 538 BC; II Chronicles 36:20-23).

Seeing what awful destruction had occurred because of sin, particularly idolatry and Sabbath-breaking, the returning exiles vowed never to repeat these sins (Ezra 9:5-15; Nehemiah 1:4-11; 9:1-10:39; 13:15-30). Thus, the Jews have maintained their identity as "God's chosen people," while most people think the other tribes are "lost."

Summary of Principles

Our mad dash through Israelite history has focused on several essential principles that will help us identify Israel and correctly interpret biblical prophecy:

- » God chose and blessed Abraham because of his obedience, finally making His promise of national greatness and spiritual blessing unconditional.
- » Jacob had twelve sons, only one of whom was "Jewish." Thus, Jews are Israelites, but few Israelites are Jews.
- » Jacob divided the promises between Judah (the scepter/kingship) and Joseph (the birthright/double inheritance).
- » Jacob adopted Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his own, placing Ephraim before Manasseh. The name "Israel" primarily rests on these tribes of Joseph (Genesis 48:16).
- » God chose Levi to perform the priestly functions in Israel, with Aaron's line being high priests (Leviticus 8-9; Numbers 3-4). They received no inheritance in the land and were scattered among the tribes.
- » God intended Israel to be "a light among the nations" (Deuteronomy 26:16-19).
- » Israel exhibited a pattern of zeal for God, apostasy from His way, divine punishment and deliverance.
- » Israelites have an independent spirit and relish personal freedoms (Judges 17:6).

- » Early on, the tribes split into two divisions, the *house of Israel* (Ephraim, Manasseh, Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar and Zebulun) and the *house of Judah* (Judah, Benjamin and Levi). Only under David and Solomon were the 12 tribes ever united. In fact, they frequently warred against each other (I Kings 14:30; 15:6, 16, 32; II Kings 14:12-14).
- » God promised David, of the tribe of Judah, an everlasting house, kingdom and throne, ruling over the house of Israel. Thus, where David's house rules, Israelites will be their primary subjects.
- » Judah is known today because it retained the Sabbath day, the sign that identifies God's people (Exodus 31:12-17). Israel soon rejected it and became "the lost ten tribes."
- » A remnant of Judah returned to Palestine and rebuilt their towns and the Temple. Israel migrated elsewhere after their captivity ended with the fall of Assyria in 612 BC .

These principles and others set the stage for identifying Israel among the nations of history.