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The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History

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Zvi Ben-Dor Benite. *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History*.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Reviewed by Jeffrey R. Chadwick

The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History is an ambitious treatment by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, an associate professor of history and Middle Eastern and Islamic studies at New York University. The subject is a departure from the focus of his book *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late China*, but the story of the Ten Lost Tribes is intriguing, and the assembled tales of how people throughout the world and throughout history have related to the loss of the Israelite tribes make for a fascinating read. The reader should be aware that *The Ten Lost Tribes* does not, in my opinion, adequately or accurately address the eighth-century BC deportations and subsequent assimilation of hundreds of thousands of people from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Nor does it realistically identify descendants of those deportees. What the book does is tell the stories of sages, mystics, explorers, and evangelists who lived many centuries after the deportations, and their adventurous and often eccentric searches for elusive remnant societies of the lost tribes.

Of course, those searches were in vain. Unlike a century ago, or even fifty years ago, many of the realities behind the deportations of ancient Israelites are well known today to scholars who specialize in the field. Assyrian inscriptions bearing deportation counts, mostly fragmentary, but in one case quite complete, illuminate biblical references to those of Israel who were “carried away” to diverse locations in what is now Iraq and Iran. Resettled in what was the crossroads of the Eastern Hemisphere, in the decades just before and after 700 BC, those deportees assimilated with the peoples among whom they found themselves. Inter-marriage with non-Israelite locals began almost immediately. Within four or five generations, none of their descendants even retained a memory of their Israelite heritage. Lost Israel became lost not because they did not know where they were, but because they forgot who they

were. And even though their destinations were recorded in 2 Kings 17, by 600 BC not only had the descendants of the deportees lost their cultural memory and identity, they were unknown to the remainder of Israel who had regenerated in the kingdom of Judah. As Nephi observed, “Whither they are none of us knoweth, save that we know that they have been led away” (1 Ne. 22:4).

Remarkably, however, Nephi accurately foretold that the descendants of deported and assimilated Israel would literally cover the globe—“the house of Israel, sooner or later, will be scattered upon all the face of the earth, and also among all nations” (1 Ne. 22:3). Nephi’s understanding was in line with the original promise that in Israel’s posterity would “all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 28:14). These three “alls”—all the families of the earth, all the face of the earth, and all nations—seemed perhaps too extensive and inclusive for faithful Mormon pioneers of the 1800s, who instead focused on the notion that Israel would return primarily from Jeremiah’s “land of the north” (see Jer. 16:15; compare D&C 133:26; even though Jeremiah also included other lands in his oracle).

Convinced that literal Israel was in the north, but that descendants of the lost tribes could not be expected to live in Asian or African climes further south and east, pioneer Mormons taught that adoption into the house of Israel was a way that all mankind might have the benefit of the ancient covenants. While the scriptures teach that the Gentiles will be “numbered among” (1 Ne. 14:2) and “grafted” into the house of Israel (Rom. 11:13–23), the idea that the Gentiles do not descend from Abraham or Israel is nowhere expressly taught in scripture. Yet the concept of adoption into the lineage of Israel is still found in LDS conversation today. In my view, non-Israelite adoption is an unnecessary narrative, because not only was Nephi correct in identifying Israel in all the earth and all nations, but modern scientific research into common ancestry confirms that virtually every person alive on earth today can be expected to be a descendant of numerous ancient Israelites of all twelve tribes. This is implicit in the population studies of Rhode, Olson, and Chang,¹ which demonstrate that a random person living twenty-five

1. See Douglas L. T. Rhode, Steve Olson, and L. T. Chang, “Modelling the Recent Common Ancestry of All Living Humans,” *Nature* 431 (September 2004): 562–66. See also Steve Olson, *Mapping Human History: Genes, Race, and Our Common Origins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); and Steve Olson, “Descended from Jesus? Do the Math,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 19, 2006, B-13.

hundred years ago, who had four or five grandchildren that lived to reproduce, would be an ancestor of virtually everyone on earth today. As incredible as it may seem, the combination of common ancestry research and population and migration dynamics firmly establishes that every person alive today is a literal descendant of people who were deported from ancient Israel. The bottom line is that the answer to the question “who are the descendants of the lost tribes?” is “everyone on earth!” And the answer to the question “where are the descendants of the lost tribes?” is “everywhere on earth!”

But these are not issues dealt with by Benite in his book, which ultimately focuses not on the reality of what happened to the deported Israelites, or on the worldwide extent of their unwitting descendants, but essentially on searches for lost Israelite societies that most likely never were. He does, however, begin with the deportations. In chapter 1, “Assyrian Tributes,” Benite discusses aspects of the Assyrian deportations from the ancient kingdom of Israel. From my viewpoint as a specialist in these issues, Benite fails to deal accurately with the Assyrian deportation numbers. With essentially no background or specialty in ancient Near Eastern studies or archaeology, Benite relies heavily on Tel Aviv University’s Nadav Na’aman (the bibliography lists ten works by Na’aman), whose studies consistently lower population estimates in Iron Age II Judah and Israel and consistently lower estimates of the number of deportees taken by Assyria. Other studies, including the careful archaeological surveys of Yehuda Dagan and synthetic analyses of Israel Finkelstein, are essentially ignored. Benite’s basic position with regard to the “northern kingdom” that the Bible calls Israel is that “most northerners were not deported” (35).²

He makes only passing mention of Sennacherib’s campaign in Judah and does not deal with the massive deportation from Judah, nor its implication for understanding the whole nature of the “lost tribes” or the ultimate number of Israelite deportees. In particular, he does not mention Yehuda Dagan’s study, which suggests that the population of Judah was reduced by 90 percent as a result of Sennacherib’s campaign.

2. The quotation is cited from an article by Pamela Barmash, “At the Nexus of History and Memory: The Ten Lost Tribes,” *AJS Review* 29, no. 2 (2005): 218. However, Barmash, who is associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Washington University in St. Louis, is not noted in any quarter as expert in fields that deal with ancient demography or deportation, such as ancient Near Eastern studies or archaeology.

How, for example, Benite can claim that Sennacherib deported people in smaller numbers than Sargon (34) is not explained. It is certainly not accurate, since Sargon's highest single deportation reference is 27,290, whereas Sennacherib reported 200,150 deportees taken as a result of his 701 BC campaign. Benite's understanding of the 27,290 figure as representing the vast majority of the northern deportation total, rather than as the figure taken from the capital city of Samaria alone, is in conflict with the inscription in which the figure appears, which specifies the total as coming from the city itself.³

However, in chapter 2, entitled "An Enclosed Nation in Arzareth and Sambatyon," things get much better. Benite moves immediately into references to the lost tribes found in the apocryphal books of 2 Esdras ("second Ezra") and Baruch. Both works are pseudepigraphic—products of Jewish writers in the first centuries BC or AD using the names of much earlier biblical figures Baruch the son of Neriah (who lived around 600 BC) and Ezra the scribe (who lived around 500 BC). In this regard, both books are suspect, containing no original historical information. Benite adroitly discusses the origin of the myth of a mysterious northern land of Arzareth, demonstrating how 2 Esdras contracted and misspelled the Hebrew terms for "other land" (*eretz aheret*) into the single term Arzareth. The mythical Arzareth, which does not now and never did exist, serves as the hiding place for the ten tribes in 2 Esdras, who are portrayed as having repented and migrated to the undiscovered northern land to preserve their purity against an eventual return. Benite also discusses the Jewish legend of the Sambatyon, a Hellenized corruption of the term *shabbat* (sabbath), as an imagined river over which the ten tribes migrated on their way into their mysterious land of preservation. The chapter is well presented and quite instructive, and LDS readers in particular could benefit from its discussion of Arzareth, inasmuch as this supposed "land of the north" and its reference in 2 Esdras appear uncritically accepted as factual in numerous LDS sources that discuss the lost tribes.⁴

3. For a description of the three major deportations from Israel and Judah, and a discussion of the number of deportees involved, see Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2004), 87–105.

4. See, for example, James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, ch. 17 and appendix 17:4, where the 2 Esdras reference to the Arzareth migration is presented as essentially factual.

Chapters 3 through 5 of Benite's treatment take the reader on a wonderful tour of the world through the accounts of medieval to premodern adventurers, Jewish and Christian, who searched and even traveled far and wide in search of remnants of Israel's lost tribes. From "the twelfth-century globetrotter Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela" (85) who journeyed across Asia in search of Israel's remnants, to the fifteenth-century "Iberian Jewish statesman, philosopher, and scholar Don Isaac Abravanel" (117), the whole of Europe, Asia, and Africa became grounds for the search for Israel, among distant peoples as diverse as the Tartars and the Mongols, the Chinese and the Hindus, the Arabs and the Ethiopians. Frauds such as Eldad the Danite are exposed. But in terms of real people, what the travelers and thinkers actually found, when they concluded they had identified remnants of lost Israel, were really the remnants of much earlier Jewish communities, or even, in the case of the Falasha of Ethiopia, communities who had assumed Jewish identity. Scattered, odd, and diverse communities of people practicing elements identifiable as Jewish in the postexilic sense (both post-Babylonian and post-Roman exiles) were erroneously judged to be the descendants of long-lost preexilic tribes, deported by the Assyrians in the decades before 700 B.C. Such "Jewish" communities were so ethnically blended that they were in every way local, but they had enough of Hebrew language and Mosaic custom to be identifiable as at least connected to the Jews. In reality, however, no remnant of the real lost tribes was discovered.

But Benite's focus is not limited to the Old World. From Diego Duran (160) to the Dominican friar Gregorio Garcia (163), Benite describes the search for lost Israel among the natives of the Americas by Hispanic Christian explorers and thinkers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet they too found no real trace of the authentic lost tribes, only coincidental comparisons between the vocabulary and ritual of the Native Americans to their limited knowledge of Hebrew language and Jewish practices. There is reason, however, to suspect that Benite is not wholly familiar with the sources he cites in describing some of these Spanish searchers, their motives, and even their conclusions.

Chapter 6 appears at first glance to be interesting from an LDS perspective, since Benite discusses Mormons among the collection of modern groups he examines, from millennialists to the various Anglo-Israelite movements. Benite's treatment of the relationship of Mormonism to the subject of scattered Israel, however, covers a little less than three pages (184–87). Hopefully his understanding and handling of Mormon beliefs and references are not indicative of his level of

understanding and accuracy on the many other topics and groups he deals with in the book. In just three pages, his errors are frequent and significant. And even though he allows that “the well-researched history and tenets of Mormonism are beyond the scope of this book” (185), the single reference he offers “for a relevant evaluation of Mormonism” (250 n. 73) is an eleven-page block in a work by Colin Kidd, entitled *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006)—hardly a balanced or reliable treatment of LDS origin or thought.

In quoting from Mormon scripture, it is apparent that Benite has relied not on his own readings, but on snippets which appear in Kidd’s description. For example, he quotes 3 Nephi 17:4 as follows: “‘But now I go unto the Father, and also to show myself unto the lost tribes of Israel, for they are not lost unto the Father, for he knoweth whither he hath taken them,’ declared the Mormon prophet Nephi” (185). Anyone reading 3 Nephi 17 would be aware that Nephi is not speaking there, but Jesus himself. He also incorrectly dates Moses’s appearance in Doctrine and Covenants 110:11 to 1831 (186).

Not only is Benite relying on secondary quotations from Mormon scripture, he also draws his entire picture of the Mormon understanding of scattered Israel not from thoughtful works by modern Church authorities, such as Bruce R. McConkie’s *A New Witness for the Articles of Faith* (Deseret Book, 1985), but on the work of interested amateurs, such as weatherman Clayton Brough’s *The Lost Tribes: History, Doctrine, Prophecies, and Theories About Israel’s Lost Ten Tribes* (Horizon, 1979). Benite summarizes Mormon belief about the lost tribes with an Orson Pratt quote taken from Brough’s book: “The Prophet Joseph [Smith] once in my hearing advanced his opinion that the Ten Tribes were separated from the Earth; or a portion of the Earth was by a miracle broken off, and that the Ten Tribes were taken away with it, and that in the latter days it would be restored to the Earth or be let down in the Polar regions” (186–87). Thus is the Mormon concept of the scattering and gathering of Israel stereotyped; hence my concerns about the accuracy of Benite’s treatment of many points throughout his book.

Benite’s concluding chapter, which includes the most recent attempts by the government of the State of Israel to identify certain small groups in Ethiopia, India, and even Peru as remnants of the Israelite tribes, is a nicely stated summary of the state of the search for lost Israel. The search, he concludes, is kept alive by the sense of loss the biblically connected world continues to feel because of the disappearance of the

ancient tribes. Since his book is not so much about where lost Israel is now to be found, but rather what people have thought and said about the tribes over the centuries since their departure, there is essentially no end to the story. Israel remains still very much lost.

Although Benite's treatment will not make my list of "must-read" works on biblical Israel and the Assyrian deportations of the lost tribes, it is an interesting and at times even a fascinating read into the efforts of many people over many centuries to rediscover, reclaim, and even restore lost Israel.

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