

This is Part Thirteen of the Serial Publication in PDF and Video,  
including the first half of Chapter Nine.

The  
PRODIGAL SON  
PROPHECY

God's Amazing Plan for the Restoration of the Two  
Hebrew Houses and the Salvation of the Gentiles

By Dr. Scott Lively

# THE RETURN TO THE LAND

## DID ISRAEL RETURN FROM BABYLON WITH JUDAH?

It is commonly taught in modern churches that the House of Israel returned to the Holy Land with the House of Judah at the end of the Babylonian exile, but that is largely untrue.

There were, of course, individual members of all twelve tribes in both houses, and some trickled back to the Holy Land over the centuries. The Apostle Paul notes their presence in his testimony to Herod Agrippa in Acts 26:6-7: *“And now I am standing trial for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers; the promise to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly serve God night and day.”*

However, it was common knowledge in the days of the early church that the large majority of Israelites never returned to the Holy Land. The historian Flavius Josephus records this fact in *Antiquities of the Jews* (11:133, 93 AD): *“the ten tribes are beyond the Euphrates till now, and are an immense multitude and not to be estimated in numbers.”* And the Apostle James begins his epistle: *“James, a bond-servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes who are dispersed abroad: Greetings”* (James 1:1).

1 Chronicles was written more than a century after Ezra and Nehemiah led the newly freed Jews to Jerusalem from Babylon, and it states that Israel remained in exile *“to this day.”* The context from which this is drawn is a commentary on the genealogy of Reuben, which was the first of the 10 tribes captured and relocated by the Assyrians along with Gad and Manasseh long before 722BC. Thus, this particular passage is silent on the other tribes of the Kingdom of Israel but there is no indication anywhere in Scripture that the other seven did not remain with these three. They are always addressed as a single entity.

Let’s look at the context of 1 Chronicles 5:23-26, because it also acknowledges another important factor in determining the fate of the Israelites:

*“Now **the sons of the half-tribe of Manasseh** lived in the land; from Bashan to Baal-hermon and Senir and Mount Hermon they were numerous. **These were the heads of their fathers’ households, even Ephraim, Ishi, Eliel, Azriel, Jeremiah, Hodaviah and Jahdiel, mighty men of valor, famous men, heads of their fathers’ households.** But they acted treacherously against the God of their fathers and played the harlot after the gods of the peoples of the land, whom God had destroyed before them. So the God of Israel stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria, even the spirit of **Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria, and he carried them away into exile, namely the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, and brought them to Halah, Habor, Hara and to the river of Gozan, to this day.”***

Note carefully the governmental system implied by the identification of the tribal leaders in this manner. These were the important oligarchs or warlords of the Tribe of Manasseh, and it is safe to say that no matter how many members may have repatriated themselves back in the Holy Land, the legal and practical “ownership” and identity of the Tribe of Manasseh is vested in these patriarchal leaders.

Let’s now consider the matter of tribal identity in relation to the chronology of events relating to the removal of Israel and Judah from the Holy Land. (Dates are approximate.)

1. United Monarchy of Israel divided into Kingdoms of Judah and Israel 930BC.
2. Neo-Assyrian Empire established 911BC.
3. Assyria conquers and relocates Israel north of the Euphrates 740-722BC.
4. Babylon conquers Assyria 627-605BC.
5. Babylon conquers and takes Judah captive 605-586BC.
6. King Cyrus of Persia conquers Babylon 539BC.
7. Cyrus issues decree freeing Jews 538BC.
8. Hebrew Temple reconstruction completed 516BC (70 years).
9. 1 Chronicles written probably between 400–250 BC.
10. Epistle of James written 49AD.
11. Antiquities of the Jews written by Josephus 93AD.

Importantly, from its very first days in 930BC, the newly established Kingdom of Israel departed from Torah-based worship and Temple sacrifice, under its first king, Jeroboam:

*“Jeroboam thought to himself, ‘The kingdom will now likely revert to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices at the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, they will again give their allegiance to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah. They will kill me and return to King Rehoboam.’ After seeking advice, **the king made two golden calves. He said to the people, ‘It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem. Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.’** One he set up in Bethel, and the other in Dan. And this thing became a sin; the people came to worship the one at Bethel and went as far as Dan to worship the other. **Jeroboam built shrines on high places and appointed priests from all sorts of people, even though they were not Levites.** He instituted a festival on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the festival held in Judah, and offered sacrifices on the altar. This he did in Bethel, sacrificing to the calves he had made. And at Bethel he also installed priests at the high places he had made” (1 Kings 12:28-32).*

Naturally, this did not sit well with Torah-faithful Hebrews of the northern tribes:

*“When Rehoboam arrived in Jerusalem, he mustered Judah and Benjamin—a hundred and eighty thousand able young men—to go to war against Israel and to regain the kingdom for Rehoboam. But this word of the Lord came to Shemaiah the man of God: ...This is what the Lord says: Do not go up to fight against your fellow Israelites. Go home, every one of you, for this is my doing.’ So they obeyed the words of the Lord and turned back from marching against Jeroboam....[However], **The priests and Levites from all their districts throughout Israel sided***

*with [Rehoboam]. The Levites even abandoned their pasturelands and property and came to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them as priests of the Lord when he appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat and calf idols he had made. Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their ancestors. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah and supported Rehoboam” (2 Chronicles 11:1-17).*

This had the effect of further alienating Israel from Judaism and the Torah. With the Torah-faithful (*of every tribe*) gone back to Judea, the idolatrous Israelites grew ever more entrenched in their rebellion, eventually succumbing even to outright Baal worship under Ahab and Jezebel. Israel never returned to God and was therefore “divorced” by Him. The Assyrian conquest was Israel’s punishment by God’s design.

That process lasted fully 208 years, but was only the beginning. It would be over 135 more years before the whole of Judah began its own exile in Babylon, and around 200 more years before the Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. That’s around 400 total years that the Israelites had embraced paganism and rejected Judaism and Temple worship. By what logic does one assume that Israel would suddenly choose to resubmit to Judaism and to the Levites and relocate to Jerusalem?

The Bible says that House of Israel does eventually return, in the last days and in association with the second coming of Christ and His establishment of the Millennial Kingdom, but not half a millennium before Christ’s first coming, and not under the auspices of the House of Judah.

Contrast that history of the Israelites with the experience of the Judeans. The Jews’ exile was only 70 years – of which just 52 years involved actual captivity in Babylon by those captured in 586BC when the temple and the old city of Jerusalem were destroyed. Other Jews who had been taken in earlier raids, such as Daniel, had been there longer – since 605BC in his case, but still this was the blink of an eye compared to the Israelite experience. And, of course, Jerusalem was their natural home and national capital.

Moreover, all the families who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon are clearly identified in Ezra and Nehemiah as Judeans.

*“Then the heads of fathers’ households of Judah and Benjamin [The Two Tribes of the House of Judah] and the priests and the Levites [who had defected en-masse to Judah after Jeroboam’s rejection of Temple worship] arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5).*

*“These are the people of the province who came up from the captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and who **returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city**” (Nehemiah 7:6).*

As we have acknowledged, some Israelites of the 10 Tribes did return to the Holy Land over the years, but the Bible makes clear they were relatively few in number: “*though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, Only a remnant within them will return*” (Isaiah 10:20-22). Only in conjunction with the second coming of Christ will the 10 Tribes themselves return in force.

Again, note the phrase “*heads of fathers’ households of Judah and Benjamin*” in Ezra 1:5, making clear that Hebrew tribal identity is still vested in the ruling families or oligarchy, not the general population. No similar recognition of the leadership of any of the 10 tribes in the Holy Land is found in Scripture following their exile, even centuries later at the time of Jesus’ earthy ministry. In those days He referred to the Israelites collectively as “*the lost sheep of the House of Israel.*” And (unlike Judah) the part of the Holy Land most of them lived in was called “Galilee of the Gentiles,” not by the names of any of the 10 tribes.

Even in Galilee, however, the majority of the Hebrews were not Israelites but Judeans. Following is an excellent summary of the evidence from a Christian Holy Land travel website:

“Archaeological research now reveals no human occupation of the Galilee during the sixth and seventh centuries BCE. A few scattered, small settlements began to appear in following centuries, mostly military outposts and a few small farming communities which sent their harvests to the coastal cities. The same conclusions can be drawn from the excavations of major sites as well. So Galilee remains essentially empty for more than half a millennium following the Assyrian invasions.

The archaeological evidence reveals a sudden change about the start of the first century BC. Over a period of a couple decades, dozens of new villages appear. This indicates that a new, rather large, population comes into Galilee. The trend continues for the next half century or so, with many new settlements appearing and then growing larger.

Who were these new inhabitants? These new archaeological findings indicate that they were transplanted Judeans. The ancient historian Josephus relates how Alexander Jannaeus, the King of Israel from 102 to 76 BC, extended the northern boundary of his Judean-centered country into Galilee during his reign using military means.

The archaeology reveals that the new inhabitants were Judeans. First, the currency of the region is now that of the Judean Jannaeus and his successors; it is not that of the coastal cities or of Damascus further north in Syria. Second, excavated village areas reveal the same interest in religious purity common among Judeans, with ritual baths cut out of the bedrock and houses that contained stone bowls, cups and plates that were impervious to impurity. Third, the Galileans followed a Judean diet in that they did not eat pork; no pig bones are found in the garbage dumps.

So the archaeological research of recent decades now shows that the Galilean population

of Jesus' time were descendants of Judean immigrants of a century or so earlier.”<sup>1</sup>

Neither were the people called “Samaritans” Israelites either. It was the practice of the Assyrians to displace conquered peoples and repopulate their lands with conquered people from other lands, thus limiting the potential for rebellion against Assyrian control. They did this in Israel, removing all Israelites from the territory and repopulating the southern half of it, later known as Samaria, leaving the Galilean region largely unpopulated:

***“The king of Assyria brought men from Babylon and from Cuthah and from Avva and from Hamath and Sepharvaim, and settled them in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel. So they possessed Samaria and lived in its cities. At the beginning of their living there, they did not fear the LORD; therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them. So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, ‘The nations whom you have carried away into exile in the cities of Samaria do not know the custom of the god of the land; so he has sent lions among them, and behold, they kill them because they do not know the custom of the god of the land.’ Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, “Take there one of the priests whom you carried away into exile and let him go and live there; and let him teach them the custom of the god of the land.” So one of the priests whom they had carried away into exile from Samaria came and lived at Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD. But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived.... **They feared the LORD and [also] served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile**”*** (2 Kings 17:24-33).

So the Samaritans were non-Hebrews who had adopted the corrupt form of Hebrew worship invented by Jeroboam. They were neither ethnically, nor spiritually the descendants of Jacob, but occupied roughly half of the former territory of the northern Kingdom of Israel.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.travelujah.com/articles/entry/Who-were-the-Galileans-in-the-Days-of-Jesus->