



Understanding Israel -

The Tribes

by Tim Kelley

"Blow the Great Shofar for our freedom, and lift up a banner to gather the exiles, and gather us from the four corners of the earth. Blessed are You, O Lord, who gathers the banished of your people Israel."

The above is the tenth benediction of the Amidah prayer, a prayer recited by the Jewish people twice a day. For over 2000 years the Jewish people have been praying for the return of the exiles – the ten 'lost' tribes of Israel. The Amidah prayer is a snapshot of what Judaism sees as God's plan of redemption and salvation. In the prayer, the return of the Messiah is the 15th benediction. As we know, the return of Messiah ushers in the restored Kingdom of Israel. We spoke of that last time. But the Jewish people understand that you cannot restore the Kingdom without restoring the people to the kingdom. Thus, they believe that a restored Kingdom of Israel will include all the tribes of Israel united under one King.

But who is Israel? For the most part, the Jewish people today believe they are all Israel, and if that's so, who are the exiles that are to return. Are they just Jews who have abandoned a belief in God? Are they Jews who have tried to hide their identity? If all Israel is Jewish, then how can they be "lost" considering most Jewish people know they are Jewish? Certainly the Jewish people don't believe they're "lost" simply because they don't believe in Jesus.

The understanding of Israel is part of the "mystery" spoken of by Paul in the New Testament. There are many theories about the "mystery of the gospel" and the "mystery of the Kingdom of God". Various teachers have written books trying to explain such things, but without a proper understanding of Israel, Israel's calling, and Israel's role, one simply cannot understand these things, where-as on the other hand, they become quite clear with a clear understanding of what YHWH is doing with His chosen people.

So let's begin to lay the foundation that will help us to understand Israel as she is revealed to us through the pages of the scripture. We'll begin at the beginning of the book.

ESV Genesis 2:21-24 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²² And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³ Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." ²⁴ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast (cleave) to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

From the very beginning, YHWH established the fact that a man should take on a wife. A man and a woman are to come together and become one flesh. The man is to cleave – stick to – his wife. Through thick and thin he should stand by her, protecting and supporting her. He should be always willing to take her back, for she is bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh. So marriage is a fundamental part of a person's life, and as we have discussed often in our fellowship, marriage is between one man and one woman, not one man and many women, for we know through the various accounts in the scripture the problems that occur when a man has more than one wife.

"What does that have to do with Israel?" you might ask. A lot, because to understand God's relationship with Israel, we must understand what it means to be in covenant, since in our society, covenants don't

seem to mean much to people. But marriage is a covenant, and as we get into the story of Israel, we'll find out that God enters into a marriage covenant with Israel, a covenant He intends to keep. He intends to cleave to His wife.

The story of Israel begins with Abraham. As we'll recall, Abraham was told by YHVH to leave his home in Babylon and move his family to Canaan. By so doing, Abraham would receive the land of Canaan, as well as much of the Middle East, as an inheritance for his children. But there was a problem, Abraham had no children.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 15:1** After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward." ² But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"³ Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

So God promised Abraham a physical heir, a son, and through that son Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. And notice, since Abram believed God, He considered Abram's belief to be righteousness. Now think about it. Abraham was an old man; his wife Sarah an old woman. God promised Abraham a physical heir. What do you think Abraham did once he received that promise, just sit around and believe? No, he tried to make babies! Abraham's belief stirred him to action to try to bring about what he believed.

Years later Abraham was still childless, and God came again to him to tell him that his son would be born within the year -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 17:1 - 4** When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him . . . I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly . . . and you shall be a father of many nations (hamon goyim). "

This passage doesn't just tell us that Abraham was to have a son, but that from that son would become many nations – goyim. The Hebrew words reveal even more. The Hebrew word translated "many" is "hamon" (המון) which besides meaning "a crowd", also means "noisy" and "roar". If you've ever been to a college football game, you know how noisy a crowd can be. Thus, the Hebrew gives us a hint that not only would Abraham's descendants be many, they would also be noisy. They wouldn't be nations that sort of just mind their own business, they would make an impact on the world.

Moving on in this passage we see that God formally entered into covenant with Abraham by using the "cutting of the covenant", an ancient middle eastern covenant practice that Abraham would have been familiar with. Unfortunately, most modern Biblical students have little understanding of this practice and thus fail to understand the significance of what took place.¹

One last point on this passage. God didn't say Abram's descendants would be many "people", many "ami". Instead, they would be many "nations"; "goyim" in Hebrew. They wouldn't become many people

¹ See the three articles about covenants on our website – <http://amiyisrael.org/articles.html>

in one nation, they would become many nations. And what's more, these nations would be considered "heathens", or a more familiar term – "gentiles".

Going back to God's original promise we find out another characteristic of Abraham's descendants.

^{NKJ} **Genesis 12:3** I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (barak)."

If you look at the word "blessed" in Strong's, you'll find the Hebrew word "barak" (בָּרַךְ), but if you were to look in an interlinear or any bible that has the text in Hebrew, you'll find the phrase "v'nevrecho" (וַנְּבָרְכֶנּוּ) which scholars say means "mixed".² In other words, Abraham's descendants, this multitude of nations, would mix in with the other nations and would not be an identifiable people.

Let's review what we've seen so far:

- ✧ From the beginning, God created covenants, the most common one being the covenant of marriage. This is important to the understanding of Israel because God made a covenant with Abraham and, as we'll see, made a marriage covenant with Israel.
- ✧ God called Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees and promised him that he and his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. Later God told him that he would have a son in his old age, and because Abraham believed (and acted on his belief) it was considered righteousness.
- ✧ Abraham's descendants would become a "noisy" people. They would have a place in shaping world history.
- ✧ Israel would not be one cohesive people, but would instead be a group of nations.
- ✧ Abraham's descendants would become mixed into the nations.
- ✧ By virtue of the fact that God made a unilateral covenant with Abraham, God alone is responsible for making it come to pass.

The passages we've already discussed, once we dissect them, should help us to see that the Israelite people could not all be Jews since the Jewish people have always maintained their identity and are not a bunch of individual nations. Even though the Jewish people are scattered around the world, they are not

² wūnibrūkū būkā Kōl mišPūHōt hä 'ādāmā

Artschroll Tnakh; Restoration Scriptures

Beresheit 12:3, 18:18 and 28:1

In five places in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature nivrechu is translated as "grafted" or "intermingled." In the orthodox Jewish Art Scroll Tanach Series, Volume 1 p. 432 it is written: "There is an opinion shared by Rashbam, Chizkuni, Da'as Zekeinim and quoted by Tur, that the verb "ve-nivrechu" in Genesis 12:3 is related to the root "barak" (bet-resh-kaf) as in the Mishnaic term "mavreek" meaning to "intermingle" or "graft." Hebrew word "nivrechu" is the niph'al conjugation of the root word "barak." Literally it can read: "and in you all nations will be born through mixing." The Art Scroll series agrees. In five places, this word is translated "mixed" or "grafted" by the rabbis (Keliam 7:1, Sotah 43A). The Hebrew for "blessed" is predominantly "yivrechu" not "nivrechu" using the first letter "yud" rather than the "nun". Paul had this understanding and confirms this in Galatians 3:29 and Romans 11:13 17, where he calls non-Jewish believers the grafted-in physical seed of Abraham, in direct fulfillment of the "ve-nivrechu" blessing of multiplicity in Genesis 12:3!

lost. They know they are Jewish as do the people they come in contact with. On the other hand, the rest of the Israelites are lost, un-identifiable to the nations around them.

Let's continue to build our understanding of Israel . . .

Isaac, the son of promise, is finally born and grows up. Abraham passes the blessing, the covenant promises, on to his son before he dies. Eventually, Isaac marries his second cousin, Rebecca and they have two children, Esau and Jacob. As Isaac nears the end of his life, he deems it time to pass these same blessings – the same covenant promises – on to his first-born child Esau. But there's a problem Esau sold his birthright promises to his brother Jacob for a bowl of stew. Besides that, God had already told Rebecca that Jacob was supposed to receive the birthright promises. Thus, Rebecca orchestrates a scheme by which Jacob receives the blessing and the birthright. Apparently, Esau forgot about the deal he had made with Jacob, and thus determines to kill him once he found out the birthright had passed on to his younger brother. To save Jacob's life, Isaac sent him away with this blessing -

^{KJV} **Genesis 28:3** And God Almighty bless thee, and make thee fruitful, and multiply thee, that thou mayest be a multitude (kahal) of people . . .

The New King James Version of the Bible renders this same passage a little differently -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 28:3** ³ "May God Almighty bless you, And make you fruitful and multiply you, That you may be an assembly of peoples . . .

"Assembly" is a much better understanding of the passage because the Hebrew word for multitudes is "kahal" which can mean multitudes or assembly. The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures) translates the word *kahal* as *ecclesia*, the same word that in the New Testament is translated into English as *church*. This is important because we find the New Testament writers referring to the "church in the wilderness"³. We'll get to that later.

Now it begins to get really interesting . . .

Jacob flees to his uncle Laban's home. There he meets Rachael, Laban's daughter, and eventually marries her. As part of the deal, he ends up with Rachael's sister, Leah, as well as both of their handmaidens. Over a period of years, these women give Jacob twelve sons and one daughter. In order to understand the rest of what I'll be teaching, as well as to understand the rest of the Bible, it's imperative that we understand these next few points.

First – Jacob's name was changed to Israel. Thus all of Jacob's children became "the children of Israel".

Second - Jacob's sons all had names. They are (in order of birth): Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin. As these sons grew, they in turn had children and these children became the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

Third – of all the Tribes of Israel, only one was named Judah. It is predominately from Judah that we have the people who later became known as the "Jews"

Thus, the Jewish people today are, for the most part, descended from the tribe of Judah. The son's of Joseph are not Jews; the sons of Asher, Dan, and Gad are not Jews. Only the descendants of Judah are Jews. As time goes on, we'll see that those who associate themselves with the descendants of Judah are also considered to be Jewish, but that's a relatively small group compared to the population of all the

³ Acts 7:38

tribes. In light of this understanding, we see that it's incorrect to call Jacob a "Jew". It's also incorrect to call Moses or even Abraham a "Jew". In fact, Abraham wasn't even an Israelite. What is correct is to say that they were all "Hebrews". Abraham was a Hebrew, Isaac was a Hebrew, Jacob was a Hebrew, and their descendants were likewise "Hebrews".

The point to remember is that "all Jews are Hebrews, but not all Hebrews are Jews". To further refine that thought – "all Jews are Israelites, but not all Israelites are Jews".

Now that we understand that not all Israelites are Jews, we can discuss the story of Joseph.

Other than Yeshua, more text is devoted to the story of Joseph than any other character in the Bible. His story pretty much takes up one third of the book of Genesis. When you look at the events of Joseph's life and compare them to that of Yeshua, you find many similarities. In fact, based on what Joseph did, you might even say that he was Israel's "first savior".

For the sake of understanding Israel, we need to know that Joseph was considered the *firstborn of Jacob* in regards to the birthright promises. Obviously, Joseph was not Israel's firstborn, but he was the firstborn of Jacob's first wife, the one he was first betrothed to.⁴ Once Reuben disqualified himself by taking his father's concubine, Joseph gained the status of firstborn of Israel.⁵

While in Egypt, Joseph married an Egyptian woman and had two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, Manasseh being the oldest. Shortly before Jacob died, he wanted to pass the birthright that he had received from his father, Isaac, which Isaac had received from his father, Abraham, on to Joseph. But instead of passing it on to Joseph, Jacob adopted Joseph's two sons and gave the birthright promises to them, predominantly to the younger son, Ephraim. Here's how the story goes –

ESV Genesis 48:1 After this, Joseph was told, "Behold, your father is ill." So he took with him his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. ² And it was told to Jacob, "Your son Joseph has come to you." Then Israel summoned his strength and sat up in bed. ³ And Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me, ⁴ and said to me, 'Behold, I will make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will make of you a company of peoples and will give this land to your offspring after you for an everlasting possession.'⁶

So Jacob told Joseph that he had been given certain promises by YHVH Himself, and now it's time to pass these on. Continuing . . .

ESV Genesis 48:5 And now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are.

As the story continues we find that Jacob took the lads on his lap, then crossed his hands, thus giving the larger blessing the Ephraim, the younger son, and says -

KJV Genesis 48:16 The Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads; and let my name be named on them . . . and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

⁴ In Hebrew understanding, a couple is legally married once they become betrothed. Jacob was betrothed to Rachael when he agreed to work seven years for Laban in exchange for her hand.

⁵ 1 Chronicles 5:1

⁶ Hebrews 11:21 – it appears Jacob bowed down to Joseph!

This is an interesting blessing because Jacob is saying two very important things. First, he said that his name – Israel – would be associated with these two boys, Ephraim and Manasseh. Secondly, he said that the descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh would grow like fish in the midst of the nations. The Hebrew word for *grow* in this passage is *dagah*, and *dagah* is also the Hebrew word for *fish*. In fact, the Artschroll Tnakh renders this passage as such – “. . . let them proliferate like fish.” This brings to mind this New Testament passage –

^{NKJ} **Matthew 4:19** *Then He said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men."*

Not knowing what his father was doing by crossing his hands, Joseph tried to remove this father's right hand, the hand that should go on the firstborn, and put it on the older son, Manasseh, but Jacob knew exactly what he was doing and said -

^{NKJ} **Genesis 48:19** . . . "I know, my son, I know. He (Manasseh) also shall become a people, and he also shall be great; but truly his younger brother (Ephraim) shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations."

Here again we have Jacob saying some profound things that are hidden away in the Hebrew. The typical way to indicated *multitude* in Hebrew is with the word "robe" (רב), but instead of saying *robe* Jacob says *melo* (מלא) which means "fullness" or "to fill up". In the Hebrew it says that Ephraim would become a "melo ha goyim", or in English, "a fullness of the Gentiles". Here again, a New Testament verse comes to mind –

^{NKJ} **Romans 11:25-26** For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The Deliverer will come out of Zion, And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob . . .

Do we understand the significance of what happened there nearly 3500 years ago? God took the birthright promises and put them in the hands of Ephraim. As we'll see later, Judah was given kingship, culminating in the Davidic line of kings ending with Yeshua, but the birthright promises, the responsibility of the family, was given to Ephraim. What's more, Joseph, the one who saved Israel from starvation, who was the father of Ephraim, became, in essence, the brother of Ephraim, and by extension, the father and the brother to all twelve tribes.

Reiterating what Paul said earlier, "Brethren, I do not desire that you should be ignorant of this mystery". What YHVH is doing is remarkable, and He wants us to know what's going on. Knowing the truth about Israel is the Key to understanding the mystery.

Shalom Aleichem!