

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Twelve Tribes

The existence of the Twelve Tribes in the Promised Land after the Exodus can be attested outside the Bible.

1) The presence of Semitic "Hebrew" people in Egypt is shown by more than lists of slaves. A record left by Amenhotep II, circa 1438-1412, states that he returned from Asia with 3600 Apiru captives^{NET}.

2) Modern scholars place the Exodus under Moses sometime late in the thirteenth century BC. Traditionally it took place some two hundred years earlier around the middle of the fifteenth century, at the time of Amenhotep II. Various considerations apply to the fixing of the dates. Modern archeology supports the later dates rather than the earlier ones.

3) A huge black stele erected by Marniptah, circa 1224-1211, in his mortuary temple at Thebes, lists Israelites as one group of opponents then located in Canaan. However, the text shows them to be a landless people^{NET}. The date of the stele was the fifth year of Marniptah's reign; therefore we may assume that Hebrew tribes had entered the land of Canaan but had not yet settled down to definite geographical locations. This would be the period described by Joshua before the apportionment of the lands.

The Marniptah stele is the first known historical record of uniquely identified Israelites outside the Bible.

4) From archeological excavations we know that Palestinian sites at Lachish, Debir, Hazor and Bethel were destroyed in the latter part of the thirteenth century. These sites are attested in the biblical record: Lachish in Josh 10:31-32, Debir in Josh 10:38-39, Hazor in Josh 11:10-11, and Bethel in Judg 1:22-26. The destruction may have been due to the Hebrew tribes in their conquest of Canaan.

A remark in Exod 12:38 says the people were a "mixed multitude." This mixed multitude was in addition to some 600,000 men, not including women and children, Exod 12:37. The number of men older than twenty years is given in Exod 38:26 and Num 1:46 as 603,550. This is a very large body of people. If the number of woman equaled the number of men, and if

the number of children equaled the number of adults, the total number of people would have been in excess of 2,000,000. Add the "mixed multitude" with cattle and goods and there would have been an impressive array of marching people.

The numbers are unrealistic. If they moved four abreast and remained six feet apart between ranks they would have created a marching line extending some six hundred miles from the Nile to the Euphrates river. This number of people approaches that of the population of the modern state of Israel. Such a multitude would have been unmanageable. Besides the problems of logistics there would have been severe problems in communication. Two to three million people in tents would have required perhaps five thousand acres or eight square miles to camp.

The numbers must have been much smaller. When the people saw the Egyptian army approaching they appealed to Moses, Exod 14. A miracle occurred which permitted them to cross the "sea" dry shod. Then another miracle took place. A strange cylindrical object, a "pillar of cloud" called the angel of God, moved through the air and hovered between the two camps so that one did not come near the other all night, Exod 14:19-20. In the morning, as the Egyptians tried to pursue, the "sea" came rushing back and caught the Egyptians in the water.

We must conclude that the Jewish scribes who put the accounts together either had unrealistic numbers in their source documents or elevated the numbers to bring greater glory to Israel. They cannot be taken literally; they must be examined against hard evidence. The record of the subsequent movement into Canaan must also be examined with prudent care. The Haberu records in Chapter 29 provide a more realistic picture.

Although the biblical accounts may contain exaggerated numbers we should not neglect the truly extraordinary care exhibited by divine agents. Time and again Moses talks with the God of Israel, face to face, Exod 33:11. He went up into the "mount," that strange object, on several occasions, Exod 19, 24, and so on. In one visit he took with him Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. They saw the God of Israel and they ate and drank with him, Exod 24:9-11. In several places it is recited that Moses was so moved by his experiences that his face shone, Exod 34.

During these strange events in the Sinai the covenant with Israel is renewed. God remembered his covenant with Israel and respected it, Exod 2:24-25, 6:4-5. If they obeyed God and kept his covenant they would be a

special treasure above all people. They were to be a holy nation and a kingdom of priests, Exod 19:5-6. As a sign of the renewal of the covenant they were to keep the Sabbath day throughout all generations as a perpetual reminder of the covenant, Exod 31:14-16. They were to obey the ten commandments; they also were not to make molten gods or go a whoring after the gods of pagan people.

The tribes spent forty years wandering in the wilderness. They were told when to stay and when to go by that strange cylindrical object in the sky, a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, Exod 13:21, 40:35-38, Num 14:14. Moses supervised the people of Israel; he was the direct link between celestial beings in that strange object and the people; he was God's human agent. He also was a foremost proponent for righteousness. But when the tribes reached the Jordan his work was finished. He died before they entered the promised land. They now were mostly on their own.

As I showed earlier, the book of Joshua is a highly glamorized account of the conquest of the promised land. The scene was not simple. The people of Canaan were generally of Semitic stock, and thus related to the tribes. They strongly intermarried, as illustrated by Esau and other members of the Abrahamic family. The first chapter of the book of Judges shows that the inhabitants were allowed to remain. The returning tribes mixed with them. These factors must be considered in any assessment of conditions and interplay among people. The descriptions by later Jewish scribes suppress reality to sharply heighten the religious meanings and to show the personal hand of Yahweh in support of his chosen people.

Chapters 13 to 21 in Joshua show the allocation of the lands to the respective tribes. Reuben, Gad and a half tribe of Manasseh were given shares on the eastern side of the Jordan, "beyond the Jordan east of Jericho." Only the tribe of Levi received no allotment. The other tribes all received apportionments, from Simeon, Benjamin, and Judah in the south to Asher, Naphtali, Issachar, and Zebulun in the north. The tribe of Ephraim was near the center of the geographical distribution, with another half tribe of Manasseh just north of him. Dan also received a portion west of Benjamin just south of Ephraim. Asher was on the coast in the lands traditionally assigned to the Phoenicians, including the city of Tyre. Naphtali was just east of Asher on the mountain range separating Phoenicia from Syria.

Were there twelve distinct tribes? Probably, but constantly mixing. Witness the free marriages with surrounding people. Genealogy was highly

important. The heavy concentration on genealogy in the Bible demonstrates how dear a record of ancestry was held by those people. In Num 36:5-12 Moses commanded that the people should marry within their own tribes. However, the tribal boundaries blurred as people intermarried. Common sense discounts strict tribal identities, but the tradition is very strong.

An important characteristic of the Hebrew people was their chasing after the popular gods and social trends of other people. As a group, they did not adhere to one God. Moses was constantly warning them of their tendencies. During their travels in the wilderness they were warned against turning to the idols and images of helpless gods. When they pleaded for molten gods, Aaron and Miriam fashioned one from golden ornaments. Moses was delayed in his activities on the "mountain." In his absence the people felt a need for an object they could worship. In spite of the many miraculous deeds, the presence of that awesome flying object, and communications directly from celestial beings, they still demanded idols. They simply could not forsake the old habits. When Moses returned and saw the calf he was hot with anger. The people just could not understand a living God; they constantly reverted to dead gods, Exod 32.

As they settled down to a life of relative ease in the promised land, and without the direct presence of celestial beings, they forgot God even more quickly. In short order they turned to the Ashteroth, to Baal, and to pagan superstitions. Ever and again Yahweh would raise up judges from among the people, voices who would remind them of their example as a light to the world. The book of Judges describes this period, from the time of settlement of the lands, to the time of Samuel and Saul. The judges included Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Tola, and Jair among others. The spirit of Yahweh came upon Othniel and he judged Israel, Judg 3:10. Chapters 4 and 5 describe Deborah, the only woman judge. Even more famous is Samson, whose exploits are described in Chapters 13 to 16.

It is not my purpose to detail the history of Israel. That has been done admirably by others, including John Bright in *A History of Israel*^{HO1}. Bright compared the biblical account against the many historical records available from all over the Near East and from Egypt, for the entire period of the Israelite experience. The patriarchal period is adequately supported by clay-tablet documents and accounts from Mesopotamia, showing that the Hebrew families easily had origin in the general locales and among the tribes that the Bible portrays. Likewise the captivity, return, and settlement in

Canaan are fully supported both by contemporary documents and by archeology. Anyone familiar with the data, reading firsthand the accounts of the many officials, would not question that the Bible reflects description of those days, even if embellished and glamorized. If the historical books were compiled by Jewish scribes during the Babylonian captivity those scribes had to be working from material that was a faithful reflection of prior ages.

The people of Israel had been warned against putting their trust in worldly power. The book of Judges ends with the remark that in those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes. It was God's purpose to be king and ruler in Israel. If the people obeyed his commandments they would have no need for political rulers. But they drifted continually from high moral and religious standards. They envied the worldly power of the nations round about. They wanted to be like those nations, putting their faith in kings and armies. When the Philistines made war with them they were defeated in battle at Aphek. They felt that if they took the ark of the covenant into battle God would give them victory, I Sam 4. Their plan failed; the ark was captured. Although it was eventually returned they still demanded a king, I Sam 8.

In our study of these events we often fail to recognize God's objective. If a nation lives in truth, honesty and righteousness it has no need for kingly rulers. All will obey the commandments, not out of fear of God's laws, but because it is the expression of their hearts. Mutual respect, confidence and trust will rule; not earthly power. There will be no need for laws, police, enforcement, or complex administration. A nation founded on high principles of moral conduct and righteousness would truly be an example to others. It would become a light to the world.

But Israel failed. Her people simply were not matured to such elevated and godly culture. Nor have any people been since that time.

When Samuel became old he appointed his sons Joel and Abijah as judges over Israel. But they took bribes and perverted justice. The people came to Samuel saying that his sons were unjust and that he was old; they wanted a king to rule over them like all the nations. When Samuel prayed to Yahweh he was told to listen to the request of the people. They had rejected Samuel; they had rejected God. Because of their waywardness, from the time he brought them out of Egypt, forsaking him and serving other gods, he would grant them their request. Samuel was to warn them solemnly. He was to explain the ways of earthly kings. Their kings would build

a military state, taking a tenth of everything to support their armies, and appointing men and women to work for the state. When the kings did this the people would cry out but Yahweh would not answer them.

Still the people refused to listen; they would not heed the warnings. They demanded to have a king. When Samuel again went to Yahweh he again was told to give them a king. Their doom was sealed.

Saul was a man of self-conflicts. He had a striking appearance, towering above his fellows, I Sam 9:2. He exercised initiative, 11:7, but he was also full of pride, 18:8, and rebelled against the word of Yahweh, 20:31. Although he displayed bravery, Chap 13, he was reckless, 14:24. When he was older he was beset by mental disorders, 16:14 and 19:9, and consulted familiar spirits, Chap 28. He did this because Yahweh would not answer him, either through dreams, the Urim, or the prophets.

In his younger days David was a handsome lad of great common sense and clever actions, I Sam 16:12, 17:49, who was greatly respected by the people, 18:7. In his later years he became a wicked man who lusted after Bathsheba, the wife of one of his army generals, II Sam 11. When the woman became pregnant with his child he schemed to have Uriah, her husband, killed in battle, II Sam 11:14-17. The wickedness spread itself through his house. David's son Amnon betrayed his half-sister Tamar; by trickery he raped her, II Sam 13. Absalom, her full brother, then also resorted to trickery to kill Amnon, 13:29. Absalom again later practiced deception, Chap 15, to take over the kingdom. Although David had to flee for his life he returned to power but with further strife and rebellion, Chaps 19-20. He lived a troubled life until the day of his death.

In the granting of kingly inheritance to Solomon treachery still prevailed, I Kings 1. Although David's reign is held in fond memory by Jews and Christian's down to this day the glamour is not justified by the accounts given in the Bible.

Time and again the people of Israel had been warned not to stray from God. If they did not obey his commandments -- if they went after the Ashteroth and worshipped Baal, they would reap the consequences. They admitted serving the Baals and the Ashteroth, I Sam 12:10.

Solomon is remembered as the king who brought much glory and riches to Jerusalem but he did so at high cost to the kingdom. He went after the Ashteroth, I Kings 11:5. He had hundreds of wives and concubines; he loved many foreign women, I Kings 11:1. He built temples to foreign gods

for his many foreign wives. He forgot Yahweh; his ambitious plans for kingly glory set the stage for national disintegration. He was told that the kingdom would be torn apart, not in his day, but in the days of his children, 11:11-13.

Upon his death the kingdom became divided between the northern ten tribes and the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah. The two divisions became known as the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Thereafter the people were in constant strife and contention with one another.

From the time of Moses they were warned. If they did not harken to God, if they walked contrary to him, they would suffer great affliction. They would eat the flesh of their sons and their daughters, Lev 26:29. God would destroy their high places and cut down their incense altars; he would cast their dead bodies upon the dead bodies of their idols; he would destroy their cities and devastate their lands. And surely he would scatter them among the nations, Lev 26:33. They would have no power to stand before their enemies; they would perish among the nations, Lev 26:37-38. If, when they were in the lands of their enemies, they confessed their iniquities and their treacheries which they committed against him, he would remember his covenant with Jacob, with Isaac, and with Abraham. God also would remember the land, but it would lie desolate without them. Yet, for all that, when they were in the land of their enemies he would not spurn them that they might be utterly destroyed, but for the sake of the covenant he would remember them.

The same warnings were repeated in Deuteronomy. Yahweh would scatter them among the nations and they would be left few in number, Deut 4:27. But then, in the latter days, when they would be in tribulation and all these things would come upon them, they would return to Yahweh their God and would obey his voice, 4:30.

Chapters 28-33 of Deuteronomy continue with repeated warnings but also with promises of what God would do with his people.