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The Twelve Tribes of Israel

Author(s): Joseph Fielding Smith

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Abstract: This article explains the composition of the twelve tribes and their division between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

THE EDITOR'S PAGE

(Concluded from preceding page)

In the light of such unimpeachable testimony as given by the ancient apostles—testimony dating from a few years subsequent to the event itself, in the light of that most marvelous revelation in this age of the Living Christ, it seems difficult indeed to understand how men can still reject him, and doubt the immortality of man.

There is no cause to fear death; it is but an incident in life. It is as natural as birth. Why should we fear it? Some fear it because they think it is the end of life, and life often is the dearest thing we have. Eternal life is man's greatest blessing.

If only men would "do his will" instead of looking hopelessly at the dark and gloomy tomb, they would

turn their eyes heavenward and know that "Christ is risen!"

The message of the resurrection is the most comforting, the most glorious event given to man, for when death takes a loved one from us, our sorrowing hearts are assuaged by the hope and the divine assurance expressed in the words:

"He is risen; he is not here." (Mark 16:6.)

With all my soul I know that death is conquered by Jesus Christ—through righteous living and obedience to his teachings.

Because our Redeemer lives, so shall we! I am thankful that I know that Christ is my Redeemer.



by Joseph Fielding Smith

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

The Twelve Tribes of Israel

Question:

"We would like to be put straight on the twelve tribes of Israel. We have been discussing them in our class, and it seems that we have several conflicting opinions. We know that Jacob had twelve sons, but in a book with the title 'God Planted a Tree,' we find recorded the statement that Ephraim and Manasseh, sons of Joseph, took the places of Reuben and Simeon, and in the Sunday School lesson book, 'Life In Ancient America,' it also states that Ephraim was substituted for Reuben as one of the tribes in Israel. It was pointed out that in the Old Testament, Reuben and Simeon are named as tribes and that they received inheritances when the land of Canaan was divided. How did Ephraim and Manasseh become tribes and still there were only twelve?"

"Another question: which tribes formed the kingdom of Israel and which the kingdom of Judah, when the tribes were divided?"

Answer:

1. The story of the tribes of Israel, their origin, inheritances, divisions, rebellions, and final loss of their inheritances, is clearly recorded in the books of the Old Testament. Jacob, whom the Lord named Israel, had twelve sons, namely: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Gad, Asher, Dan, and Naphtali. Each became the ancestor of a tribe in Israel and received patriarchal blessings as such when Jacob went down into Egypt. He also blessed the two sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, and adopted them as his own sons, and they were blessed as founders of tribes in Israel.

The idea that these two sons of Joseph replaced Reuben and Simeon springs from the words of Jacob when he chose them for adoption, as recorded in Genesis

Chapter 48, verse 5, as follows: "And now thy two sons, Ephraim and Manassch, which were born unto thee in the land of Egypt before I came unto thee into Egypt, are mine; as Reuben and Simeon, they shall be mine." A careful reading will show the true meaning to be that they should be sons of Jacob just the same as Reuben and Simeon were, not that they were to replace them. Then again some confusion has come because it is recorded in I Chronicles 5:1, that while Reuben was the firstborn, because of his transgression the birthright was given unto the sons of Joseph. The matter of birthright, however, did not have anything to do with a place among the tribes of Israel, and Ephraim was not substituted as a tribe for Reuben.

When Israel came out of Egypt under the guidance of Moses, the Lord prepared to make of the twelve tribes a royal priesthood and honor them by choosing from among them faithful men to hold the Melchizedek Priesthood. Because of their constant rebellion and murmuring, in which they had Aaron make for them a golden calf to worship when they thought that Moses was dead, the Lord's anger was kindled against them. Therefore he took Moses and the Melchizedek Priesthood from them and left them with another authority or priesthood, which he bestowed upon Aaron and his sons, and chosen men of the tribe of Levi,¹ to be the priests and ministers for all the tribes of Israel. According to this calling Aaron and the tribe of Levi, to which Aaron belonged, obtained this great honor, and henceforth the Levites were not numbered as one of the tribes, for the Lord said he would scatter them through all of the tribes to be their ministers and their priests. Therefore he commanded Moses as follows:

¹See D & C 84:23-27.

(Concluded on following page)
THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

"But the Levites after the tribe of their fathers were not numbered among them.

"For the Lord has spoken unto Moses, saying,

"Only thou shalt not number the tribe of Levi, neither take the sum of them among the children of Israel:"²

"And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of all the first born that openeth the matrix among the children of Israel: therefore the Levites shall be mine;

"Because all the firstborn are mine; for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast: mine they shall be: I am the Lord."³

So the tribes of Israel lost the glorious privilege of holding and officiating in the Melchizedek Priesthood, and in his anger the Lord added to what he gave them, the carnal law, which continued with Israel until the resurrection of Jesus Christ when it was fulfilled.⁴

Again it was a rebuke to the tribes of Israel when the Lord said further to Moses:

"And thou shalt give the Levites unto Aaron, and to his sons: they are wholly given unto him out of the children of Israel.

"And thou shalt appoint Aaron and his sons, and

they shall wait on their priest's office: and the stranger that cometh nigh shall be put to death."⁵

We discover that it was Levi and Joseph who were not numbered as tribes in Israel. Joseph received a double portion through his sons, each inheriting through their adoption by their grandfather, and Levi's descendants becoming the ministers to all the other tribes of Israel.

2. After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam ascended the throne of Israel. Then there came to him representatives from the tribes under the leadership of Jereboam, requesting that the heavy taxes which had been levied by Solomon be reduced. This King Rehoboam refused to do, and in his reply to this petition he spoke roughly and said: "My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."⁶ Thereupon the complaining tribes rebelled and set up Jereboam as their king. Two tribes remained loyal to Rehoboam, and he reigned over them in Jerusalem. From that time forth Israel was divided into the two kingdoms, Israel composed of ten tribes, and the kingdom of Judah, with the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin and such scattering of other tribes who resided in the territory of the kingdom of Judah.

²Num. 3:9-10.
³1 Kings 12:14.

⁴Numbers 1:47-49.

⁵Ibid., 3:12-13.

⁶3 Nephi 15:3-6.

Joseph Filling Smith

On belonging to a family

Richard L. Evans

ONE OF THE very wonderful things of life is a sense of belonging. And one of the most wonderful things to belong to is a loyal and affectionate family—a family who have each their own individual activities and interests but who feel a real oneness with one another. There is much that a family can do with oneness, and much that without it is missed. There are so many things to join, so many things to do, so many things to take our time, so many things to take us away, but a loving and loyal family is still one of the most wonderful things in the world to belong to. Families differ: They differ in their affections. They differ in their demonstrativeness. They differ in their sharing of confidences and interests and activities. Families are sometimes abused, sometimes slighted, and sometimes seem to reserve the right to quarrel and criticize one another, and often take each other for granted. But let some need arise, some tragedy threaten, some sorrow come, some loss or loneliness—and thoughts turn homeward; hearts and arms are opened; and families sense their oneness and their common claims and causes. Parents, of course, are the ones mostly who keep families close. But even after parents have left this life,

families ought to rally around one another, and keep close, and not pull part, and always preserve a gathering place, and carry on traditions and see that the next generation become acquainted with one another—for this sense of belonging, this "togetherness," is a source of strength, of comfort, of safety and security, of peace and protection. And he who has it has more to live up to, more to account for, more to keep him in safe paths and high purposes. The years move swiftly. The blessed years when we have our loved ones with us are all too short, and we should hold in love and loyalty to those on whom we have the closest claims. And no matter who comes or goes, and no matter where time takes us, families should keep close, for a sense of belonging is one of the sweetest, most satisfying things in life; and there is no finer thing to belong to than a loyal and affectionate family—and it will be so, always and forever.

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