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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE BOOK OF JONAH

Part 7

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not? And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not.” (Jonah 3:5-10)

The strange prophet’s frightening prediction spread like wildfire throughout the great city of Nineveh. Idle curiosity, if there was any, soon changed to fear and consternation. A verse from Luke’s Gospel needs to be brought in at this point. It is the word of the Lord Himself, who tells that: *“Jonas was a sign unto the Ninevites”* (Luke 11:30). Jonah was a sign. This pertains to the man himself independent of his message. How can this be explained? How could the prophet, **in himself** be a sign? It may be conjecture, but it would appear that news of Jonah’s experience had spread far and wide. Could it be otherwise? A prophet of Israel actually attempting to flee from his God! His plans to get right away to distant Tarshish; then a fearful storm; all the cargo lost; the terror of all on board; the cries and prayers to many gods; then the lot which fell upon the prophet, leading ultimately to him being cast overboard – which resulted in an immediate calm. These sailors would have broadcast this in every port at which they called. Merchantmen who would come from other countries to various sea ports to do business

would hear and carry the news back to their own people. In this way, heathen nations learned that Israel's God was not to be trifled with. If an Israelite disobeyed the Lord, as this son of Amittai had done, then judgment would follow. However, that was not all – for when this fellow was cast into the sea and presumed drowned, it was not so. For right alongside of the ship was a great fish which immediately swallowed the man alive, and alive he remained in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Then did the fish swim to shore and vomit him up on dry land, so he never died at all. He has himself told of his experience, and how he prayed to God during those 72 hours in the fish's belly – God heard his prayers and delivered him. What a story it all was! Are we to assume that such a dramatic happening as this was only casually remarked upon? Why, it would be reported everywhere; for here was the man himself – the prophet who tried to flee from his God. The sailors would readily identify him as the very man whom they cast into the midst of the Mediterranean, in a storm the like of which they had never seen. Now here he is alive, and as if nothing had happened. What is more, he is back upon his prophetic duties once again; actually, he is gone off to Assyria.

Here lies the meaning of the words 'Jonah was a sign'. The word 'sign' is defined as 'a symbol', 'a token', 'a proof'. What was Jonah a token of? Namely this: that if a person disobeys God, he will pay the price. The experiences of Jonah symbolise the judgment of God upon the disobedient. While the confessions and prayers of the prophet with his subsequent deliverance was a proof that God is a God of mercy. Jonah was a sign of all this. His very existence now proved the point. There can be no doubt but there were those in Nineveh who had heard about this prophet; now here he is in their very midst. 'This is the man' (they say), 'that was in a fish's belly for 72 hours and came out alive; he should be dead, for he was cast into a raging sea; but His God delivered him; now here he is marching through our streets; listen to what he is saying!' "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" – forty days and our great city will be no more.' 'This fellow's message cannot be treated

lightly; we dare not ignore it; the God of Israel is behind all this; the God who caused the waters of the sea to suddenly break forth in unparalleled fury in His judgment upon one man is proof that He means what He says; the very presence of this man now amongst us is a token of this.’ ‘It is now for us to remember that this prophet, who, when in such dire straits prayed to his God and was delivered; this then is a sign to us that we should do likewise.’ Yes, Jonah in obedience preached unto the Ninevites the preaching which he was bidden of God to bring (cf Jonah 3:2), and was himself a sign unto them. Does not all this illuminate and give an explanation to the words “*So the people of Nineveh believed God*” (Jonah 3:5)?

This same description can be read in a number of other Scriptures, for example, concerning Abraham: “*And he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness*” (Genesis 15:6); of the Hebrews: “*And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and His servant Moses*” (Exodus 14:31); and by way of exhortation: “*Hear me, O Judah, and ye inhabitants of Jerusalem; Believe in the Lord your God, so shall ye be established; believe his prophets, so shall ye prosper*” (2 Chronicles 20:20). This expression, ‘believe God’, means ‘to say Amen’ to all that God has said. It denotes acting in accordance with the Word of God. This is exactly how the people of Nineveh responded: they believed what God had said through His prophet Jonah; they said ‘Amen’ to it, and acted accordingly. They proclaimed a fast and put on sackcloth.

Theirs was not just a vocal confession of sin; it was not repentance in word only; it was manifest to all. In fact, every inhabitant of that exceeding great city was equally affected; from the greatest of them even to the least of them (cf Jonah 3:5). Let us not glibly read, or lightly consider this, for it was an amazing happening in the Gentile world of Old Testament times. Here is the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, an exceeding great city of some 60 miles in circumference, and all its populace, from the highest to the lowest was wrought upon by the word

of the Lord, through the ministry of **one single prophet**. Here must application be made, for generally speaking, the professing church of recent generations has formed the idea that, if anything is going to be accomplished for God, then it has to be 'done big'; all the Christians must get together regardless of belief or practice; committees must be formed; great organisations set up; mammoth advertising campaigns; appeals sent out for donations to cover the huge expense involved; skilled musicians must be employed; talented singers engaged; large auditoriums booked; radio and television time secured. Where does it stop? And of what benefit is it all? Despite the organising and ingenuity of man over many years, the professing church gets weaker and weaker, sinking ever deeper into apostacy. One great lesson taught by the example of Jonah is this: the Lord's work requires a man who will be faithful, and 'preach the preaching which God bids him'; God wants nothing more; and by such preaching, He will work. It might be to the salvation of one individual – as in the case of Philip and the Ethiopian (cf Acts 8:26-39) – or it can be to bring repentance to a great city, as at Nineveh. But it is God who produces the results through the working of the Holy Spirit, and it is always according to His own will. It is as stated in Romans 9:11, "*that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of Him that calleth*".

When the Ninevites were to be brought to a realisation of their sinnership, God did not require a great band of men to accomplish His purpose – He chose just one individual. Then, it was not the man, it was the message, and the God who gave the message. Is not this an encouragement? When people pour scorn upon a small but faithful testimony, it matters not, if those few are true, and 'preach the preaching that the Lord bids'. It is by means like this that God accomplishes His purposes, whatever those purposes might be. These might never be known to the people involved, but it is not their concern. Jonah had no idea if or how Nineveh would react to his preaching, in fact it seems that he thought little if anything would be achieved by it. What is more, he was very upset at the result of his labours – but that will

come out in a later article. We return to the chapter in hand, and the repentance of the people; old and young, male and female, of all ages, classes and conditions.

“For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes” (v. 6). Even the king himself heard the prophet, and not only received the message, but was affected by it in the same manner as his people. Descending from the throne in humble submission to the God of Heaven, he cast off his royal garments and put on coarse sackcloth, vacating his luxurious apartments for the dust-heap. Amazing story is this! Little wonder that the Book of Jonah has been styled a ‘book of miracles’. Can such a thing even be imagined? The king of Assyria, the largest empire in the world of that time, stepping down from his throne, casting aside his robes of splendour, covering himself in hessian and sitting amongst the cinders?

Neither is this all: *“And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water”* (v. 7). This is even more remarkable. The king publishes a decree that even the animals of the land must be deprived of food and water. The squealing of hungry pigs, the bellowing of thirsty cattle, the bleating of sheep for food, all these are cries of distress from the animal creation. They pierce the heart of any farmer, who is quick to satisfy them with that for which they cry. Such is the lovingkindness of the God of heaven that he ‘preserveth man **and** beast’ (cf Psalm 36:6). Such is His care that not even a humble sparrow falls to the ground without His knowledge (cf Matthew 10:29). Could these Gentiles of Nineveh have had some comprehension of these things? Could it be that they thought, in addition to their other measures, the cry of distressed beasts would also touch the Creator’s heart? For after all, if Nineveh was to be overthrown, and all the inhabitants perish, there was little hope for their livestock. It would be a common doom to both man and beast.

“But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands” (v. 8). Even beasts were to be covered with sackcloth. No doubt this is a reference, as one commentator suggests, to the horses and camels which in Eastern countries of the era would have typically carried elaborate harnesses and ornamental coverings on their backs, upon which noblemen rode. This was to be removed and replaced with rough materials, all emblematic of the people’s sorrow for sin. Not in exactly the same connection, but going back some five or six generations to the days before motor vehicles, funeral hearses in this country were horse-drawn, with each horse wearing black drapes and plumes, symbolic of death. In Nineveh, sackcloth was used instead on their draught animals, symbolic of repentance and contrition. The people, by decree of the king, were ‘to cry mightily unto God’ and ‘turn every one from his evil way’. The fasting and change of clothing by itself would not alter their moral condition – there must be a complete change of life and a turning unto God. They must realise that the God of Heaven, who was speaking through the prophet, looked beyond the outward appearance only, unto the very heart of man (cf 1 Samuel 16:7). The external measures meant nothing, unless there was an inward departure from their former evil ways.

“Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?” (v. 9). The Ninevites had doubtless heard of the manner in which God had dealt with the preacher who was now in their midst. He was a runaway, unfaithful prophet, who actually fled from His God. For his evil ways, the Lord brought chastisement and severe trouble upon him, but in his great distress and appalling condition, he prayed, and was delivered. This man was a sign to the people of Nineveh, in which they recognised themselves, and their own situation. ‘Who can tell’ they said, ‘if we truly repent and cry unto the Lord, whether He may also have mercy upon us, that we perish not?’ They received the prophet, they believed God’s message, they observed the gracious sign – with what result? *“And God saw their works, that they*

turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that He had said that He would do unto them; and He did it not.” (v. 10). Their repentance was real; they were genuine, and God saw it. The preaching of Jonah was effective; it produced the end that God ever had in view; it resulted in Nineveh being saved – although the original message was that it should be destroyed. The threatened judgment proved to be ‘a savour of life unto life’ (cf 2 Corinthians 2:16) – even though at the time of Jonah going into the city, it appeared to him, as indeed to any other observer, that the message could be nothing other than ‘a savour of death unto death’. History has often repeated itself. Many a sermon of this nature has been preached; sermons which appear drastic; their whole content being of death and judgment – *“there is no difference, for all have sinned”* (Romans 3:22-23); *“The soul that sinneth, it shall die”* (Ezekiel 18:20); *“The wicked shall be turned into hell”* (Psalm 9:17); *“For our God is a consuming fire”* (Hebrews 12:29); *“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Hebrews 10:31) – and from such Scriptures, the preacher has brought no relief, and afforded no hope. Neither did Jonah – yet a whole city repented. But remember, there was also the sign. Jonah was a living proof that the God whom he served was a God who forgiveth iniquities (cf Psalm 103:3); a God who is ready to pardon (cf Nehemiah 9:17).

In the world today, there are still signs to a people doomed to judgment; living proofs of the fact that they too were once under divine sentence, ‘the children of wrath even as others’ (cf Ephesians 2:3) and ‘condemned already’ (cf John 3:18). But they have repented and cried mightily unto the Lord for mercy; they have been saved from wrath to come. Did they prove themselves worthy? Did God change His mind concerning them? No indeed, for He is always immutable; He ever and always accomplishes His purposes exactly as He planned. These are His elect people, *“manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ . . . written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God”* (2 Corinthians 3:3); *“made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men”* (1 Corinthians 4:9).

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

MEN OF NINEVEH

As for me, 'I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet' (cf Amos 7:14) yet I understand clearly thus much of the future, and I proclaim, both loudly and distinctly, that if we be changed, and bestow due anxiety upon the state of our souls, and desist from iniquity, we shall encounter nothing to molest or injure us. And this I plainly know from the love of God toward man, as well as from those things which He has done for men, and cities, and nations, and whole populations. For He threatened the city of Nineveh, and said, "*yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*" (Jonah 3:4). 'What then', I ask, 'was Nineveh overthrown? Was the city destroyed?' Nay, quite the contrary; it both arose, and became still more distinguished . . . For from that time, it has been a sort of excellent haven for all who have sinned, not suffering them to sink into desperation, but calling all to repentance; and by what it did, and by what it obtained of God's favour, persuading men never to despair of their salvation, but . . . setting before them a good hope, to be confident of the issue as destined in any wise to be favourable. For who would not be stirred up on hearing of such an example, even if he were the laziest of mortals?

For God even preferred that His own prediction should fall to the ground, so that the city should not fall. Or rather, the prophecy did **not** even so fall to the ground. For if indeed, while the men continued in the same wickedness, the sentence had not taken effect, someone perhaps might have brought a charge against what was uttered. But if when they had changed, and desisted from their iniquity, God also desisted from His wrath, who shall be able any longer to find fault with the prophecy, or to convict the things spoken of falsehood? The same law indeed which God had laid down from the beginning, publishing it to all men by the prophet, was on that occasion strictly observed. What then is this law? "*At what instant I shall speak*", says He, "*concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; if that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil*"

that I thought to do unto them" (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Honouring then **this** law, He saved those who were converted, and upon their departure from wickedness, He departed from His wrath.

He knew the condition of the barbarians; therefore He hastened the prophet there. Thus was the city agitated at the time when it heard the prophet's voice; but instead of being injured, it was benefited by fear. For that fear was the means to its safety. The threatening effected the deliverance from the peril. The sentence of overthrow, put a stop to the overthrow. O strange and astonishing transaction! The sentence threatening death, brought forth life! (cf 2 Corinthians 1:9) ... with God, the publication of the sentence was to effect its annulment. For if it had not been published, the offenders would not have heard; and if they had not heard, they would not have repented; and if they had not repented, they would not have [escaped] the punishment, nor would they have obtained that astonishing deliverance ... They had heard that the buildings would fall, and yet they fled not from the buildings but they fled from their sins. They did not depart each from his house ... but each departed from his evil way; 'for', said they, 'why should we think the walls have brought forth the wrath? We are the causes of the wound; we then should procure the medicine'. Therefore they trusted for safety, not to a change of habitations, but of habits.

... Let us imitate the spiritual wisdom of the barbarians. They repented, even on uncertain grounds. For the sentence had no such clause, 'If ye turn and repent, I will preserve the city'; but simply, "*yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown*" (Jonah 3:4). What then said they? "*Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from His fierce anger, that we perish not?*" (v. 9). Who knoweth? They know not the end of the event, and yet they do not neglect repentance! They are unacquainted with God's method of showing mercy, and yet they change upon the strength of an uncertainty. For neither was it in their power to look at other Ninevites who had repented and been saved; nor had they read prophets; nor had they heard patriarchs; nor had they enjoyed counsel, or partaken

of admonition; nor had they persuaded themselves that they should certainly propitiate God by repentance. For the threatening did not imply this. They were doubtful, and hesitating as to it; nevertheless, they repented with all diligence. What reason then shall we have to urge, when those, who had no ground for confidence as to the issue, are seen to have exhibited so great a change; but thou who hast ground of confidence in the mercy of God, and who hast frequently received many pledges of His care, and hast heard prophets, and apostles, and hast been instructed by actual events; hast yet no emulation to reach the same condition as these did! Great assuredly was their diligence! But greater by far was the mercy of God!

... Let us not then be procrastinating till tomorrow. For we know not what the next day may bring forth (cf Proverbs 27:1); nor let us say, 'we shall conquer this habit little by little'; since this little and little will never come to an end. Wherefore, dismissing that excuse, we should say, 'If we do not [repent] ... today, we will not leave off till we do, though ten thousand things were to press us; though it were necessary to die, or to be punished, or to lose all we have; we will not give the devil the advantage of slackness, nor the pretext of delay'. Should God perceive your soul inflamed, and your diligence quickened, then He also Himself will lend His assistance to your reformation! Yea, I pray and beseech you, let us be in earnest, lest we also hear it said of us, 'the men of Nineveh shall rise up, and shall condemn this generation' (cf Luke 11:32) for these, when they had once heard, repented themselves; but we are not converted after frequent hearing. They when they heard that their city would be overthrown were affrighted; but we, though we have heard of Hell, are not affrighted. These, men who did not partake of the instructions of the prophets; we, enjoying the advantage of perpetual teaching, and of much grace.

John Chrysostom (347 – 407)

excerpts from *Homilies on the Statutes to the People of Antioch Nos. V & XX*

Note: while we demur from the doctrines of Chrysostom in many particulars, these portions seemed worthy of publication – Ed.

TRUE REPENTANCE

The reformation at Nineveh discovered its genuineness by proper resolutions and purposes of amendment. The sorrow and regret that were felt for the past, gave rise to better counsels for the future; each one turned from his evil way, and from the violence that was in their hands. By this the Ninevites showed how well they had come to understand the character of God. They knew Him to be no capricious and arbitrary being, but holy, just, and good – one who comes near to the execution of judgment only as the righteous avenger of sin, and who must, therefore, regard all repentance as a mockery which stops short of a renunciation and abhorrence of the misdeeds which have provoked His displeasure ... God must first cease to be the Holy One and the Just, before He can recall the sentence of condemnation against transgressors, and make them partakers of blessing while they are still following the ways of unrighteousness – He must appear, if not directly the patron of sin, at least comparatively indifferent to the distinctions between right and wrong!

... The case of the Ninevites stands for all ages as a memorable example of how little instruction will suffice when the heart is properly disposed to make a profitable use of it. The light that shone upon them was but a faint glimmering compared with the full blaze of truth which now irradiates the world – and yet it proved sufficient to bring them into the way of peace and blessing. Would that the believing and earnest spirit, which then wrought so powerfully at Nineveh, did but pervade and rest upon the lands of the Bible now – what different fruits would appear from those which are commonly seen amongst men! Instead of seeking for excuses to cloak their indifference, or standing aloof under benumbing fears and doubts, as multitudes are wont to do, sinners would be everywhere seen awaking to spiritual life, and laying hold of the arm of God for salvation.

Patrick Fairbairn (1805 – 1874)

LONG SHADOWS

4. Nationalism (continued)

In this series of articles, considering aspects of the Jewish religion that have been erroneously perpetuated in the New Testament church, we have begun to examine the topic of Jewish nationalistic aspirations, and the grievous ‘wresting of the Scriptures’ which is done in their support. This philosophy, sometimes called ‘Zionism’, and its adoption by many misguided Christian denominations, has created centuries of war and bloodshed in the Middle East, which continues to the present time.

The origin of these errors lies in a ‘carnalising’ of the Old Testament prophecies, and an insistence that they must have a physical fulfilment in a geographical location, amongst an ethnic group of people descended from Abraham. Calling that mixed multitude which today occupies modern Israel ‘the Jews’, and making them out to be the successors and heirs of that nation described in the Bible, is just **one** way in which the error is propounded. But it has also bred different fallacies – namely that **other** people-groups are in fact the biological and legitimate descendants of Old Testament Jewry, and can lay claim to the promises of Scripture on that basis. The various versions of this error are as bizarre as they are numerous, and their inherent contradictions and inconsistencies sufficient to show them manifestly false. If they remained confined to the realm of myth, we could justify leaving them in a deserved obscurity. But regrettably, some aspects of these ideas continue to pollute present-day Christendom. In recent years, an article by a respected author appeared in a mainstream religious newspaper, in which the historical (and frequently violent) English involvement in Ireland was defended, on the grounds that it represented a continuation of the struggle between ancient Israel and the Ammonites. Meanwhile, the nationalistic poem ‘*Jerusalem*’ by William Blake – itself infused with the same ideology – is frequently sung and enjoyed by patriotic English Christians, with little concern for the falsehoods that it espouses.

Firstly, let it be stated that any attempt to prove a genealogical connection between a person living in the 21st Century, and the Old Testament patriarchs, is futile and doomed to failure. Even the application of genetics technologies would be of no use. Anyone who has experience of studying family history will know something of the complexity and difficulties which this presents. Even for a person living in Great Britain – an island nation with well-defined boundaries, relatively few foreign invasions or natural disasters, and well-preserved historical records – to try and establish one’s ancestors going back two thousand years would be well-nigh impossible. By contrast, Palestine has for millennia been one of the most tumultuous spots on Earth – variously governed by every major world empire since the Egyptians, often subject to wholesale destruction and depopulation, its name, borders and language changed too frequently to mention, and the current incumbents in residence for less than a century. Any notion of a traceable lineage, or demonstrable pedigree there, is foolish.

And what if it were achieved – and someone claimed to know their provenance back to the dawn of the Common Era – what then? Divine sovereignty wonderfully preserved the genealogy of Christ – through David, the tribe of Judah, to Abraham and ultimately Adam – but this is exceptional and unique. No other ‘family tree’ was so miraculously defended against the vicissitudes of time. All the rest have long since perished. And even if this were not the case – and someone claimed to show their connection back through four millennia to the family of Jacob – what would this prove? Exactly what the Bible teaches: that those ancient people were themselves merely an amalgamation of Chaldeans, Canaanites and Egyptians, (cf Genesis 15:7, 38:2, 41:45), frequently intermarrying with other nations (cf Matthew 1:5) distinguished by nothing else, but the intervening grace of God – for which there are no biological markers. To suggest that a genetic formula exists for Biblical Jewishness, which could be tested for, approaches the very thinking of those authorities that perpetrated dreadful pogroms and purges in the early 20th Century.

Secondly, many of the theories and claims for biological connection back to the Old Testament Jews centre upon the ten tribes that collectively formed the northern kingdom of 'Israel', as distinct from the southern kingdom of 'Judah', to which Benjamin was also annexed, after Rehoboam and Jeroboam's civil war (cf 1 Kings 12). The experiences and outcome for these neighbouring states were different. Israel, with its capital at Samaria, was ruled by a succession of ungodly monarchs, frequently usurped by battles and conspiracies, who led the people in worsening cycles of idolatry, until in 721 BC, they were conquered by the Assyrians, with much of the population deported as captives to destinations in Mesopotamia (cf 2 Kings 17). Judah, meanwhile, maintained the worship of God at Jerusalem to a greater or lesser extent, being blessed with occasional good kings, and their judgment was thus withheld until 586 BC, when conquest came in the form of the Babylonians (cf 2 Chronicles 36). These last remaining Jews were also exiled, but with the promise of return after 70 years (cf Jeremiah 29:10) which did ultimately occur – a small remnant returning in little parties over a 120-year period, rebuilding a temple and the walls of Jerusalem, and forming that community to whom the Saviour would ultimately come. There was no such return for the northern territory however, or the Hebrews who had once comprised it, earning them the title (in the opinion of some) of 'the Lost Tribes of Israel'. It is upon them that various myths and false teachings have been based.

Most conspiracy theories and heresies rely for their survival upon a wilful ignorance of any facts that would undermine or contradict them. This case is no exception. If the Scriptures are diligently studied, it will quickly be seen that there is no such thing as the 'Lost Tribes' – their fate is well documented. It should be registered that there is **not** a direct correlation between the twelve sons of Jacob, and the twelve tribal regions into which the land of Canaan was divided. This is a common misconception, which can be quickly dispelled by reference to a good historical map. The Biblical record shows that, on account of the sins committed by their titular heads (cf Genesis 34, 49:5-7) there would be

no tribal areas for either Simeon or Levi; instead, Simeon was amalgamated with Judah from the start (cf Joshua 19:1, 9); while the Levites, destined for the service of the Temple and spiritual help of the people, had no land allocation (cf Numbers 18:23-24), only a selection of cities with their suburbs, dispersed throughout the country (cf Numbers 35). There was also no tribe called 'Joseph', as in honour of that godly patriarch, his descendants were given a double portion, namely Ephraim and Manasseh (cf Genesis 48:3-6, 22). This latter tribe was so numerically large that it was further subdivided into two distinct regions, one on the east, and the other to the west of the Jordan river (cf Numbers 32:33). This accounts for ten territories in the Northern Kingdom, even though the descendants of four of Jacob's sons comprised the Southern.

With worsening apostasy in Israel, but intermittent revivals in Judah, there are several reported instances when members of the 'Ten Tribes' sought asylum in the south (cf 2 Chronicles 11:13-17, 15:9, 30:1-12, 18), despite their former allegiances. For this reason, some of their distant descendants were still to be reckoned in the early First Century (cf Luke 2:36). But what became of the majority of Israel's population? It was one of the particular sins of that nation that they did not separate themselves from the adjoining heathen countries, but quickly adopted their gods, their customs, and their people as spouses – one of the worst examples being that of king Ahab, whose wife was Jezebel, daughter of Ethbaal of Tyre. Thus by the time of their exile, these tribes were already hopelessly amalgamated with other races; and having no moral objections to the practice, it would have continued apace after their deportation to Assyria. Also, unlike Judah in the later Babylonian invasion, Israel was not emptied of inhabitants and left desolate, but repopulated with a mixture of peoples, including some Israelites, producing a strange and eclectic hybrid (cf 2 Kings 17:24-34).

So great and numerous were the historical sins of Israel that their judgment was proportionally more severe. No time-limit was given to

their exile, and no reprieve or prospect of return was made (unless in a moral and spiritual sense). *“Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of His sight: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only ... And the Lord rejected all the seed of Israel, and afflicted them, and delivered them into the hand of spoilers, until He had cast them out of His sight. For He rent Israel from the house of David ... Until the Lord removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day”* (2 Kings 17:18-23). The prophecy of Amos, some 50 years prior to the Assyrian conquest, is largely concerned with the permanence and finality of that event (cf Amos 2:6 – 9:8) *“They that swear by the sin of Samaria, and say, ‘thy god, O Dan, liveth’; and, ‘the manner of Beersheba liveth’; even they shall fall, and never rise up again ... I will slay the last of them with the sword: he that fleeth of them shall not flee away, and he that escapeth of them shall not be delivered ... though they go into captivity before their enemies, thence will I command the sword, and it shall slay them: and I will set mine eyes upon them for evil, and not for good”* (Amos 8:14-9:4).

With such solemn threats and woes as these, it might be imagined that no right-thinking person would ever wish to be identified with, or connected to, ancient Israel – as it would bring with it this inheritance of terrible curses. But these facts did not deter various people from declaring themselves the successors of the northern tribes in later ages. Their pretensions were never countenanced by the Jews of the time, who would not even dignify these claimants with the name of ‘Jew’ – instead, those who inhabited the north-western reaches of the land were called ‘Samari-tans’ after the former Israelite capital, and those who settled east of the Jordan, claiming descent from the tribes that once dwelt there, as ‘Gad-arenes’. All the evidence of God’s Word refuted their contention to be the progeny of the ‘lost tribes’ – which were not lost, but **extinct**, as prophesied. Given this background, it might be expected that claims to succession are a thing of the ancient past. In fact, there have been many more recent and outlandish examples.

Thirdly, consider the sheer number and diversity of claims to Israelite descent which exist around the world, in completely different geographical directions, including those separated (for much of history) by impassable oceans. These include the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and numerous ethnic groups in India and Africa; it has also been claimed for the French, British, native and non-native Americans, Scandinavians, and Japanese. By contrast, archaeological sources record the Assyrian king Sargon capturing approximately 30,000 Israelites at the fall of Samaria. Even allowing for this figure to exclude women and children, or to be one of several waves of deportation, their numbers were evidently small. Accepting estimates of a total population of about 400,000 the succession theories then require that this body of people preserved their national and tribal identities, escaped their enforced exile in Assyria, travelled around the globe, and populated countries as remote as Mexico, Norway, Zimbabwe and Japan – all without leaving any meaningful record of their exploits in the annals of history. This is to stretch credulity beyond its limits.

Space will not permit, neither would it be profitable, to consider all of these contrived and competing claims, supported as they are by pseudo-science and faux-linguistics, belonging not to the sphere of fact, or faith, but of fantasy. However, because of its relevance to much of our readership, the matter of ‘British Israelism’ demands closer attention. The notion of Israelitish lineage in Western Europe finds its earliest documented expression in some isolated writings of French Huguenots at the dawn of the Seventeenth Century. While it is true that some monarchs (notably James I) arrogantly appropriated Biblical language to themselves in speeches, this seems to have been mostly in a metaphorical, rather than a literal, sense. The theory remained relatively obscure until the 1800s where it gained currency among newly formed sects, including the Brotherites, Christian Science, and Elim Pentecostal movements, and was exported to America by the Mormons. It was later championed by the Armstrongites, and still persists today, with various societies, publications and websites repeating the claims –

albeit proportionally smaller in the support they command. However, their proponents are rarely found to concur with each other, giving contradictory accounts of which Israelite tribes are the forebears of the English and Scots, or which king was supposedly the first with a lineage back to David. Commonly, Ephraim and Manasseh are quoted as the origins of Britain and America, while others favour the tribe of Dan. Still others make these two western civilisations to be the successors of Judah and Benjamin, and deny any other nations calling themselves Jews. In short, ‘their witnesses agree not together’.

Fourthly, note the occasions and circumstances under which these ideas have been promoted and received credence. It might be asked, what is to be gained by adherence to these strange doctrines, and why is anyone concerned with them? History shows that there is inevitably an ulterior motive. Often, these theories have been used by nations or people-groups to justify dubious activities, such as war, territorial expansion, colonisation, repression of their foes, enforced conversion – or as a retrospective explanation for their misdeeds. By casting the actors in a conflict situation in the roles of Old Testament characters, or making them their literal successors, a ready-made excuse is at hand for all manner of evils. Another use of these theories is to lend legitimacy to religious sects and cults that otherwise have no basis in the Word of God. In the absence of support from the Scriptures, an alternative justification has to be found, and a fictional lineage from Israel is quite easy to invent. Still another reason for the popularity of these ideas is that they can be used to further a variety of false teachings, including extreme forms of dispensationalism, and sensationalist Millennial notions of the last times.

One thing is clear – when the history of these theories is examined, they are never found to be productive of true faith, or godliness, or dependence upon the Lord Jesus Christ. As with any religious system that bestows advantage on the grounds of birthright or parentage, so this invented ideology of descent from Israel erodes any requirement for conviction, or conversion. It fits the Apostle Paul’s description of ‘another gospel’ (cf Galatians 1:6-7) by teaching men to seek salvation

through a biological connection to an ancient tribe. By implication, if this can be reliably proved, then they have nothing to fear, because they can claim immunity, or a right to Divine favour, on the basis of genealogy. It is against these very falsehoods that so much of New Testament truth is directed. Central to the Christian faith is Christ Himself, “*Neither is there salvation in any other. For there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12) – not the name of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or any of his sons – only Christ.

Those who desire to obtain the blessedness described in Scripture should not attempt to prove, for example, that they are the children of Dan by a convoluted family tree, but instead strive to be “*the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.***” (Galatians 3:26-29).

R. J. Steward

“Let us take the Word of God simply as we find it. Let us beware of fanciful identifications, which, even were they true, are not worth the stress laid upon them. Suppose I could prove, not by conjecture, but by registered genealogies, that I belong to the tribe of Ephraim or Issachar, what does it profit me? Will it make me a holier man to know that I belong to those northern tribes against which the Lord, when here, pronounced His darkest woes, as primarily and pre-eminently His rejectors? “*Woe unto thee, Chorazin! Woe unto thee, Bethsaida! ... it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you*” (Matthew 11:21-22). Capernaum, the representative of the Ten Tribes, had been condemned for refusing the Lord of Glory before Jerusalem was cast away. To esteem external national prosperity as God’s special mark of favour, is to carnalise all the prophets, and to degrade, not only the glory of the latter day, but present privileges in Christ; for what a poor thing these privileges and the glory must be, if this sinful nation of ours, that seems ripe for judgment and rejection, be the exhibition of them.”

Horatius Bonar (1808 – 1889)

EDITORIAL

We greet with cautious optimism the renewed focus upon Abortion practices, which has been prompted by recent legislative changes in the United States. That a supposedly civilised, medically-advanced society should consider ‘death’ an acceptable and routine form of birth control seems impossible to credit, yet such is the degeneracy of the present age, with latest statistics (OHID, 2022) indicating some 250,000 abortions per year in the UK, approximately one-quarter of all reported pregnancies. The intentional destruction of one’s own children, and the slaughter of the unborn were once regarded as among the most grievous offences of heathen nations (cf Deuteronomy 12:31, 2 Kings 3:27, 8:12), but have been normalised in a post-Christian world. Upon these manifestly sinful works, it seems hardly necessary to write.

However, one aspect of the latest ‘pro-life’ campaigns has been widely reported in the secular and religious press, which, to judge from the confused response and commentary, is worthy of closer examination – namely, persons visibly standing, and ostensibly praying, in the vicinity of Abortion clinics, or other contentious sites. This has led to individuals being removed by the authorities in some cases – to a flurry of protests regarding the infringement of religious liberties or freedom of expression.

Why have particular people chosen to act in this way? The examples of prayer given in Holy Scripture make no prescription as to posture or stance, and show a wide variety (cf 1 Kings 8:54, 18:42, 2 Kings 20:2, Psalm 28:2, Nehemiah 1:4, 2:4-5, Matthew 26:39, Ephesians 3:14, etc). Nor is it necessary to be in physical proximity to the thing prayed for, in order that prayer might have an effect. When praying for a sick relative, it is not needful to stand outside their home or hospital; when praying for persons in authority (cf 1 Timothy 2:2) it is not required for one to stand near a government building or parliament. The motivation of

these ‘protest pray-ers’ is clear: they want to be seen to pray, and make a public spectacle. Upon this point, the Saviour gives direct instruction: “*when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, **that they may be seen of men.** Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, **use not vain repetitions,** as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. **Be not ye therefore like unto them:** for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him.” (Matthew 6:5-8).*

Christ’s own example accords with these words, for whilst His prayers were sometimes public (cf Luke 10:21, 23:34, John 11:41-42) the great majority were made privately (cf Matthew 14:23, Mark 1:35, Luke 6:12). Though Daniel’s praying was witnessed by his detractors, and brought him into persecution, he was only maintaining his long-established practice of private, domestic supplication (cf Daniel 6:10). Elijah made many prayers (cf James 5:16-17, 1 Kings 17:19-20, 18:42-43, 19:4, 10) but only once before his enemies (cf 1 Kings 18:36-37).

The well-known passage in Ephesians 6 describes “*praying always with all prayer and supplication*” (v. 18), but does not liken it to any part of the spiritual armour. Prayer is a Christian’s converse with his God, and not something to be ‘weaponised’ against his adversaries. “*The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much*” (James 5:16), but those who ‘for a show make long prayers’ (cf Luke 20:47) achieve nothing other than to debase this heavenly exercise to the level of a protest performance, and bring reproach upon the cause of truth.

Preliminary Announcement

ANNUAL BIBLE CONVENTION

Saturday 7th & Lord’s Day 8th June 2025 D.V.