

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

Is the American Indian Descended From the Ten Lost Tribes? - I

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*Note: Unless otherwise noted all quotes are from **The American Indian (UH-NISH-IN-NA-BA)**, **The Whole Subject Complete in One Volume** by Elijah M. Haines, the Mas-Sin-Na'-Gan Company, Chicago, 1888, Chapter IV pages 98 - 115. The book is available from google books.*

Introduction

Nach tells us that “Tiglath-pileser (II Kings xv. 29) or Shalmaneser (*ib.* xvii. 6, xviii. 11), after the defeat of Israel, transported the majority of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, and placed them in Halah and Habor, on the stream of Gozan, and in the towns of Media. In their stead a mixed multitude was transported to the plains and mountains of Israel.”¹

Much mystery surrounds what happened to the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Many groups have, over the years, claimed to be descended from these tribes. These include the Bnei Ephraim of southern India who claim they are descended from *Shevet* Ephraim; the Nasranis of Kerala, India (ancient Malabar); the Bnai Israel from the Indian cities of Mumbai, Pune, Ahmadabad, and the Pakistani cities of Karachi, Peshawer and Multan; the Bnai Menashe of northeast India who claim to be descended from *Shevet* Menashe; the Beta Israel (Falashas) of Ethiopia; the Bukharian Jews who claim ancestry from the *Shevet* Naphtali and *Shevet* Yissachar; some Persian Jews who claim descent from *Shevet* Ephraim; as well as a number of other groups.

Rabbi Menashe Ben Israel

Rabbi Menashe, who firmly believed that Moshiach would soon arrive, was convinced by Montesinos that these South American Andes' Indians were descendents of the Ten Lost Tribes. In 1650 Rabbi Menashe published the sefer *Mikve Israel* in which he recounted in detail Montesinos' stories and claims about the Jewish origins of South American Indians. The book was translated into English and was widely read. Many, besides Rabbi Menashe, became convinced that the ingathering of the lost tribes would soon take place and that the Indians of South America would be part of this.

The Indians of North America

Perhaps the most bizarre claim regarding the Lost Tribes was the belief held during the 17th, 18th and part of the 19th centuries that the aboriginal peoples found here when the New World was discovered were descended from Jews. While this claim may sound ridiculous today, many people believed it to be true, particularly Protestant Evangelicals, and much “evidence” was advanced to substantiate it. Below we sketch the “basis” for some of these beliefs.

James Adair

There were many who believed that the some North America Indians were descended from Jews.

“Many writers have given special attention to an inquiry into the subject of the American aborigines, with reference to discovering an affinity of this people with the Jews, or people of Israel.

“Among the class of writers aforesaid is Mr. James Adair, who resided forty years among the American tribes, and who wrote a book on the subject, which was published about the year 1775, in which he, without hesitation, declares that the American aborigines are descendants from the Israelites, and so complete is his conviction on this head, that he declares he finds a perfect and undisputable similitude in each. He says: ‘From the most accurate observations I could make, in the long time I traded among the Indians of America, I was forced to believe them lineally descended from the tribes of Israel.’”

James Adair’s (ca. 1709-ca. 1775) **The History of the American Indians**, published in London in 1775, is probably the most significant 18th century work dealing with the life of American Indians living in the southeastern part of the country at the time. “The book, a cultural and historical study of the Catawba, Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw Indians, is based on Adair’s first-hand observations derived from his 40-year career as a deerskin trader among several southeastern Indian tribes.

“In his book, Adair dates his entry into the deerskin trade at 1735, when he briefly traded with the Catawba Indians. He quickly moved to the more lucrative Cherokee trade and soon afterward began trading with the Chickasaw. Adair, a man of education and ability, quickly caught the attention of those in power, and he was employed by the governor of South Carolina to entice a band of Chickasaw Indians to resettle at New Windsor, near Fort Moore on the Savannah River, to help defend the post—and colony—from attack by Indian allies of the French or Spanish.”²

While Adair’s career as an Indian trader and agent for South Carolina certainly makes him worthy of historic attention, “it is his book that sets him apart from other notables of the day. By the time the work was published, he had developed it from an event-driven narrative into a complex examination of the origins of the American Indians. The book details important events between the 1740s and the 1770s from the viewpoint of a

backcountry settler and merchant, including commentary on land grants and settlement patterns in West Florida and British policies regarding the Indians. It is particularly valuable in documenting the bitter struggle between British and French colonists for control of Indian allies and thus, the southern backcountry.

“More importantly, Adair’s discourse on the origin of the American Indians is the most complete and systematic attempt by an American to discuss the question up to that time—a question of prime importance among intellectuals of Adair’s day. His central thesis, which dominates the text and has subsequently caused many to dismiss the contents, includes 23 arguments purporting to demonstrate that the American Indians are of Hebrew descent (the Lost Tribes of Israel).”³

Below we shall discuss some of Adair’s “proofs” that Native Americans are descended from the ten lost tribes. The reader should keep in mind that while these arguments may sound ridiculous today, they were accepted as valid by many during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Adair’s Arguments

As mentioned above, James Adair presented 23 arguments he felt proved that the North American aborigines were descended from the ten lost tribes. These are:

“1. Their division into tribes. 2. Their worship of J-hov-h. 3. Their notions of a theocracy. 4. Their belief in the administration of angels. 5. Their language and dialects. 6. Their manner of counting time. 7. Their prophets and high priests. 8. Their festivals, fasts and religious rites. 9. Their daily sacrifice. 10. Their ablutions and anointings. 11. Their laws of uncleanness. 12. Their abstinence from unclean things. 13. Their marriage, divorces and punishments of adultery. 14. Their several punishments. 15. Their cities of refuge. 16. Their purifications and preparatory ceremonies. 17. Their ornaments. 18. Their manner of curing the sick. 19. Their burial of the dead. 20. Their mourning for the dead. 21. Their raising seed to a deceased brother. 22. Their change of names adapted to their circumstances and times. 23. Their own traditions, the account of English writers; and the testimonies given by Spaniards and other writers of the primitive inhabitants of Mexico and Peru.”

In next month’s column we will examine some of these “proofs.” None of them, of course, have any basis.



Portrait of William Penn



Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851)

¹ **The Jewish Encyclopedia, Volume XII**, Ktav Publishing House, Inc, 1901 - 1905, page 249. This article is available at www.jewishencyclopedia.com

² **Encyclopedia of Alabama, James Adair**,
<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1098>

³ Ibid.