

Is the American Indian Descended From the Ten Lost Tribes?

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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

Much mystery surrounds what happened to these 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.

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.”¹

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).”²

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.”

We will not exam all of these “proofs.” However, in order for the reader to get the flavor of Adair’s arguments, we shall examine a few of them.

Indian Language and Dialects

“Many of those who contend for Jewish origin of the American Indian insist that evidence of this fact is found in the languages of the Indians, which appear clearly to have been derived from the Hebrew. This is the opinion expressed by Mr. Adair, in which Dr. Edwards having a good knowledge of some of the Indian languages, concurs and gives his reasons for believing this people to have been originally Hebrew.”

According to Adair and Edwards, the languages of the Indians and the Hebrews both lack prepositions, and are formed with prefixes and suffixes, something they claim is not common to other languages. They contend, “Not only the words, but the construction of phrases in both are essentially the same. The Indian pronoun, as well as other nouns, he remarks, are manifestly from the Hebrews. The Indian laconic, bold, and commanding figures of speech, Mr. Adair notes as exactly agreeing with the genius of the Hebrew language.”

Adair and others provide lists of words that are supposedly similar in some Indian languages to Hebrew words. For example, *Shilu* in Indian is supposedly the same as *Shiloh* in Hebrew; the Indian word for father is *Abba*; the word for “waiter of the high priest” is *Sagan* in both Indian and Hebrew; the word for man in Indian is *Ish* or *Ishie*.

A number of other “similar” words are given by Adair and others. In this writer’s opinion, to believe that most of them are similar to Hebrew words requires quite a stretch of the imagination. Even the ones we have listed above could be coincidence.

The Belief in One G-d

“It is said that among all the aboriginal tribes and nations of both North and South America, whatever may have been said by the Spaniards to the contrary, they acknowledged one, and only one G-d, and this again is taken by the advocates of the

Jewish origin of the American Indians as further proof that this people are descendants of the Jews. [A certain] Dr. Boudinot [who was purported to be an expert on American aborigines] says of the Indians, that they were never known, whatever mercenary Spaniards may have written to the contrary, to pay the least adoration to images or dead persons, to celestial luminaries, to evil spirits, or to any created beings whatever; in which Mr. Adair concurs, adding that none of the numerous tribes and nations, from Hudson Bay to the Mississippi, have ever been known to attempt the formation of any image of God.”

Counting Time

“The Indians count time after the manner of the Hebrews. They divide the year into spring, summer, autumn and winter. They number their years from any of those four periods, for they have no name for a year, and they subdivide these and count the year by lunar months, like the Israelites who counted by moons. They begin a year at the first appearance of the first new moon of the vernal equinox, according to the ecclesiastical year of Moses.”

The person who wrote this seems to have been totally unaware of the fact that the Hebrew calendar is based upon complex calculations that take into account both solar and lunar phenomena.

“Prophets and High Priests”

“In conformity to, or after the manner of the Jews, the Indians of America have their prophets, high priests and others of a religious order. As the Jews had a sanctum sanctorum (holy of holies), so in general have all the Indian nations. There they deposit their consecrated vessels, none of the laity daring to approach that sacred place. Indian tradition says that their fathers were possessed of an extraordinary divine spirit, by which they foretold future things and controlled the common course of nature; and this power they transmitted to their offspring, provided they obeyed the sacred laws annexed pertaining thereto.”

William Penn

William Penn (1644 – 1718) received a thorough classical education before he enrolled at Oxford. He was known as a successful real estate entrepreneur and philosopher. Penn was the founder and “absolute proprietor” of the Province (colony) of Pennsylvania which eventually became the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He was an early champion of democracy and religious freedom, and these became the cornerstones of how his colony was governed.

William Penn wrote the following to a friend in England. “I found them [the Indians of the eastern shore of North America] with like countenances with the Hebrew race; and their children of so lively a resemblance to them that a man would think himself in Duke’s place, or Barry street, in London, when he sees them.”

Elijah Haines, the author of **The American Indian**, points out, “Here, without the least previous idea of those natives being Israelites, that shrewd man was struck with their perfect resemblance of them, and with other things which will be noted. He speaks of their dress and trinkets as notable like those of ancient Israel; their earrings, nose jewels, bracelets on their arms and legs (such as they were), on their fingers, necklaces made of polished shells found in their rivers and on their coasts, bands, shells and feathers ornamenting the heads of females, and various strings of beads adorning several parts of the body.

“Mr. Penn further adds that the worship of this people consists in two parts, sacrifices and cantos (songs). The first is with their first fruits, and the first buck they kill goes to the fire; and that all who go to this feast must take a piece of money, which is made of the bone of a fish. (“None shall appear before me empty.” [A reference to Shemos 34:20]) He speaks of the agreement of their rites with those of the Jews, and adds:

““They reckon by moons; they offer their first ripe fruits; they have a kind of feast of tabernacles; they are said to lay their altars with twelve stones; they mourn a year; they have their separation of women; with many other things that do not now occur.’ Here is a most artless testimony given by that notable man [Penn], drawn from his own observations and accounts given by him, while the thought of this people's being actually Hebrew was probably most distant from his mind.”

Widespread Belief

From the above, and many other sources that we have not given, it is quite clear that the belief that the aborigine peoples living in the New World were descendents of the lost tribes was widely accepted during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Indeed, the prominent Jewish leader Mordechai Manuel Noah (1785 – 1851) was convinced of this.

“On February 14, 1837 he [Noah] delivered, under the auspices of the Mercantile Library Association, a lecture on ‘Jewish Antiquities,’ or the lost ten tribes. The lecture took place at Clinton Hall before a large and distinguished audience. Noah was well received and his lecture much praised. Soon, it was printed,³ translated into German, and reprinted. Yet, in his lecture, Noah said nothing that had not been said before. Like Protestant evangelicals, he praised Indians as virtuous and noble. Quoting published research, he linked the red men to numerous aspects of Jewish ritual and custom. He also adduced many similarities between Indian languages and Hebrew. The numerous comparisons, however, were no more convincing in Noah’s formulation than in those of his predecessors.”⁴

Today, of course, this belief is not accepted by most people and certainly not by Orthodox Jews. However, it is a fundamental tenet of Mormonism. Its founder Joseph Smith Jr., was a Judeophile who taught that Native Americans were members of some of the Lost Tribes of Israel.

DNA Testing

Simon G. Southerton's book **Losing a Lost Tribe**⁵ contains a thorough study of the pre-migration origin of Native Americans based on DNA genetic markers. His results show that these peoples are of Siberian and Polynesian. If the American Indians were of Hebrew descent, then their DNA would correlate with Middle Eastern genetic markers, which it does not. Thus, DNA testing contradicts the doctrine that the aborigine peoples living here when the New World was discovered were descended from the ten lost tribes.



Portrait of William Penn



Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851)

¹ **Encyclopedia of Alabama, James Adair,**
<http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1098>

² Ibid.

³ **Discourses on the Evidences of the American Indians Being the Descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel** by M. M. Noah, James Van Norden, New York, 1837

⁴ **Jacksonian Jew, The Two Worlds of Mordecai Noah** by Jonathan D. Sarna, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc. New York, 1981, page 136.

⁵ **Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church** by Simon G. Southerton, Signature Books, Utah, 2004