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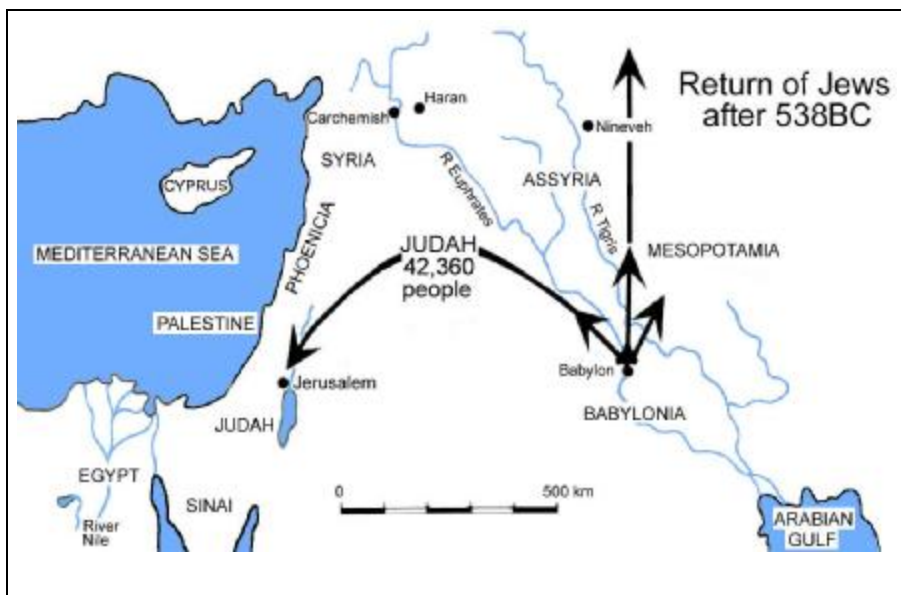
'In the beginning
God created
the heaven and the earth.'

Genesis ch.1 v.1

THE RETURN OF THE JEWS TO FORM THE THIRD ISRAEL NATION

by the late W. E. Filmer BA

It is often assumed that the Jews who returned from exile in the sixth century BC included all the twelve tribes of Israel. At first sight the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah which record their history, may give this impression, because the people are frequently called 'Israel' or even 'all Israel'. It should be realised, however, that all books written after the Babylonian captivity apply these terms to the two-tribed House of Judah, because the Jews regarded themselves as all of Israel that mattered. For example, the Books of Chronicles, even when recording history before the captivity, sometimes refer to the House of Judah as 'Israel' or 'all Israel' (see 2 Chronicles ch.24 v.5).



The composition of the biblical Jews is clearly defined by the detailed lists of the tribes, clans, or families that are provided by Ezra and Nehemiah. Following the decree of Cyrus, King of Persia, who overthrew the Babylonian empire, the first body of exiles to return to Palestine were led by Zerubbabel.

A Member of the House of David

It is stated (Ezra ch.2 v.1) that the people themselves were those whom 'Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, had carried away unto Babylon, and came again unto Jerusalem and Judah, every one unto his city'. Only the House of Judah was taken to Babylon, so they alone could return every one to his own city in Judah. This is confirmed in the list of clans and villages that follows, most of which can be identified as belonging to Judah and Benjamin but none to any other tribe. Besides these, only priests, Levites and temple servants are mentioned.

Some sixty years after Zerubbabel had returned, Ezra the scribe with about 1,500 men went up from Babylon to Jerusalem carrying the sacred vessels for the service of the temple.

Their Genealogies Are Given

Apart from two Aaronic priests and a member of the House of David, twelve families are named, all of which can be identified with those already listed as having accompanied Zerubbabel. This party was, therefore, composed exclusively of the House of Judah.

The only other repatriation of exiles mentioned in the Bible is that of Nehemiah who returned about fourteen years after Ezra. It seems unlikely that any large body of people came with him, for he was given a personal escort of Persian soldiers. Nehemiah himself was of the tribe of Judah, he had the king's permission to 'come into Judah'. This lends no support to the view that any of the other ten tribes had returned at this time.

Now although the Bible says nothing about any further exiles returning to Palestine, it could be argued that other migrations could have taken place which included some of the ten tribes. This is however unlikely because research has shown that the ten tribes who had first been taken into exile had already been driven out of Assyria and Media where they had been placed, and had migrated into Asia Minor and Russia, before Nebuchadnezzar carried away the first captive from Judah.

However, the ultimate tribal constitution of the Jews who returned to Palestine can be deduced from several lists of people in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah made at various dates after the time of Zerubbabel. If any of the Ten tribes had returned, their presence would be reflected in these representative lists.

Shortly after Ezra's arrival, it was discovered that a number of people had intermarried with foreigners. After this error had been pointed out to them, they made a covenant to divorce the wives of these mixed marriages to which Ezra made the Priests, Levites and 'All Israel', swear to.

Here the term '**All Israel**' clearly denotes the lay people of Judah and Benjamin as distinct from the priests and Levites, for the text goes on to say that 'all the men of Judah and Benjamin gathered themselves to Jerusalem' to ratify this covenant. The book then closes with a list of those who had taken strange wives. Apart from priests and Levites, 'All Israel' is grouped under families and villages. Without exception all the names are identical with those already listed as having come up from Babylon with Zerubbabel, and therefore, they belonged exclusively to the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

Again following Nehemiah's return, the Law of Moses was read to all the people gathered at Jerusalem, and a covenant was made to keep this law. A list of those who signed the covenant comprises, other than priests and Levites, seventeen families, four villages, and twenty-three individuals. Taking into consideration changes of name that had occurred in course of time, all the families and villages can be identified with those that first returned with Zerubbabel from Babylon, so it follows that they too, belonged only to Judah and Benjamin.

Finally, Nehemiah, at the end of his book, provides a census of the inhabitants of the land taken about a century after the decree of Cyrus permitting the Jews to return. He records that the rulers dwelt at Jerusalem together with a representative tenth of the rest of the population. In listing those who dwelt in Jerusalem, he mentions only representatives of Judah and Benjamin apart from priests and Levites. Finally, he says that 'the residue of Israel' were 'in all the cities of Judah, every one in his inheritance'. Clearly none of the ten tribes of the House of Israel could be in his own inheritance in any city of Judah.

Thus all the scriptural evidence points to the fact that the exiles who returned from captivity included no tribal elements other than Judah and Benjamin. In addition to this, the Jewish historian, Josephus, writing at the end of the first century of the Christian era, was still able to state in his day, that 'there are but two tribes in Asia and Europe subject to the Romans'.
