Introduction

The Twelve Tribes Tradition and the Hidden History of "Becoming Israel"

His father's stolen blessing in hand, the young Jacob, not yet a patriarch, lights out for the territories. His flight rewinds history, retracing the thread of family destiny back to Harran, where once his grandfather Abraham heard the voice of a new god speaking: *lech lecha*, take yourself and go. This time, it is the voice of his mother Rebekah that Jacob heard, telling him "look, Esau your brother is consoling himself by plotting to kill you" (Gen. 27:42).[1] He chooses the better part of valor and his life not only begins, but, happily for him, continues. In Harran, in the home of his uncle Laban, Jacob will marry, not once but twice, and become the father of thirteen children – one daughter, and twelve sons (Gen. 29–30).[2] After fourteen years, Jacob and his family return to Canaan, and near the end of his life, travel from Canaan to Egypt (Gen. 46). In Egypt, in the fullness of time, the descendants of Jacob's twelve sons become the twelve tribes of Israel, a populous and powerful nation.[3]

From the book of Exodus on, the myth of the twelve tribes of Israel is the beating heart of the story the Bible tells. It is the tribes that Moses leads out of Egypt, into the wilderness, and the tribes who conquer Canaan with Joshua. It is the tribes who divide it between them, into

[1] Biblical translations in this study are my own, save where otherwise indicated.

[2] Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun are Leah's sons; Dan and Naphtali are Bilhah's; Gad and Asher are Zilpah's; and Joseph and Benjamin are Rachel's. In many tribal lists, Joseph and Levi are not included, but Joseph's sons Manasseh and Ephraim are. Dinah is Leah's daughter, born between Zebulun and Joseph.

[3] In fact, the first use of this phrase is in Genesis 49:28, at the end of what is usually called the "Blessing of Jacob," Jacob's deathbed blessing to his sons: "all these are the twelve tribes of Israel." The second usage appears in Exodus 24:4.

twelve parts, over the course of seven, detail-heavy chapters that strain the attention span of even the most zealous consumer of biblical lists and ephemera (Josh. 13–19). Four hundred years later, it would be "all the tribes of Israel" that come to David at Hebron, pledging to him "we are your bone and flesh" (2 Sam. 5:1). Ahead, near and far, lay the division of David's kingdom, conquests and destructions, exiles and at best partial returns. But even in the last days of the Hebrew Bible's history, when the people of Judah gather to celebrate the completion of the great "Second Temple" in Jerusalem, the centerpiece of the ceremony is a tremendous sacrifice: "one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs . . . and twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel" (Ezra 6:17). From one perspective, here the curtain closes on the twelve tribes of Israel and their world.

The Hebrew Bible, however, is very far from the only body in which that heart beats. Instead, from the perspective of peoples all around the world, the story of the twelve tribes of Israel has *never ended at all*. The book closes, but, like something out of a modernist novel, the tribes climb out, escaping through the hole that is the Bible's silence on their ultimate destiny. They spread across the globe. Today, as for much of the last two thousand years, we live in a world full not only of legends about where the tribes went, what happened to them next, and what they became, but *Israels* – people who claim to be the people Israel, or have that identity claimed for them. And in each and every case, these Israels of the world understand themselves, or are understood by others, not as part of a sequel to the Bible's account, and certainly not as a fundamentally different kind of narrative, but simply the next chapter in a tribal history that is still unfolding. The myth of the twelve tribes of Israel is at the center of these stories, too – the permanent, impermeable vision of who Israel is, and always will be.[4]

My purpose in this book is to tell the story of a world full of Israels, if not as they themselves see it, then as they understand it: as a continuous one, from biblical times to today. In fact, it is to identify, for the first time – and so investigate – an ongoing phenomenon that I call "becoming Israel." This is the art, and the long-term historical practice – from the right perspective, one of the oldest, continuous, and most productive literary preoccupations in the world – of telling stories about Israel's tribes, and in fact, of acquiring and adapting Israelite identities. This

[4] Not all accounts of, or identifications with Israel involve traditions about the tribes explicitly or implicitly, especially in Christian communities. But a great many do.

phenomenon, ancient and modern, popular and poorly known, has been hidden in plain sight. Through the medium of five case studies, starting with the Israel of the Hebrew Bible itself, and continuing with discussions of the Samaritans, of Lost Tribe legends in the medieval age, of the Mormons, and the Beta Israel of Ethiopia, I plan to uncover it, exploring what inspires people to "become Israel," how it works, and how, at last, it made its way around the world.

In what remains of this introduction, however, I will explain why no scholarly attempt to study biblical and nonbiblical accounts of Israel on approximately equal terms – and as expressions of the same phenomenon – has yet been written, and why the time is finally right. And in that direction, the first point to make is that the absence of a comparative history of constructions of Israel does not mean that the traditions involved have never interested scholars. Far from it. Biblical scholars have studied the Hebrew Bible's tribal traditions as assiduously as any in that book and likely more than most. And there are now, finally – amidst a still buzzing cottage industry of publications by conspiracy theorists and treasure hunters – a growing number of serious, scholarly inquiries into the body of narratives generally referred to as "Lost Tribe" traditions.[5] The name is a little misleading; it comes from the fact that many, though far from all of these stories, take, as their starting point, 2 Kings 17's account of the exile of ten of Israel's tribes to Assyria never to return.[6] Still, the point is that these stories are known, and they have been explored.

At the same time, the study of biblical and nonbiblical tribal traditions have been quite siloed off from each other, made the province of different scholars, with different interests, and different expertise. Those who study Lost Tribe narratives often do refer to biblical traditions, but more as source material for later traditions than as a subject of inquiry of equal interest and value.[7] Scholars of the Hebrew Bible rarely refer to nonbiblical tribal traditions at all.[8] Certainly, no previous study has suggested a

[5] These include Zvi Ben-Dor Benite's *The Ten Lost Tribes* and Tudor Parfitt's *The Lost Tribes of Israel*. They also include a number of collected volumes and articles which I will discuss throughout.

[6] Actually, 2 Kings 17 does not say how many tribes there are, but since 1 Kings 11–12 says that Israel had ten of twelve tribes, and no subsequent text claims otherwise, it is the legend of the "Ten Lost Tribes" that has gone down in history.

[7] See, for example, Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes*, 31–56; Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel*, 1–27.

[8] An exception of sorts may be found in Barmash, "At the Nexus of History and Memory."

fundamental equality between biblical and extrabiblical efforts to recount tribal history.[9] No one has asked why literally identifying as Israel has proven so popular, or even so possible. No one has explored whether there is anything about the myth itself that makes it such a useful tool for the constant production of new stories, new histories, and new visions of Israel, or investigated the mechanisms of presenting, acquiring, and adapting Israelite identities in order to see what light they may shed on how they are used in any particular case.

There are reasons these silos exist, some of which we can safely ignore. The scholarly hesitance to directly compare biblical traditions to nonbiblical traditions as fundamentally similar kinds of efforts extends far beyond tribal histories and is a reflection of the sui generis status the Bible enjoys in parts of contemporary culture.[10] It has nothing to do with anything particular to how biblical traditions were composed, or what role they played in ancient Israelite and Judahite society. Other reasons that withstand little scrutiny include a long-term tendency to privilege biblical traditions specifically over early Jewish and Christian traditions about ancient Israel and Judah because of the canonical status the Hebrew Bible *came* to enjoy – and even an internalization, quite unspoken, of a general sense of "scripture" as somehow different from "tradition," for all that "scripture," too, is a determination applied to biblical traditions only externally, and only after they were composed.[11]

[9] Although I first introduced the idea that the biblical vision of Israel is more similar to Lost Tribe traditions than many realize, if without substantial discussion, in Tobolowsky, *The Sons of Jacob*, 244. My point was simply that if the Judahites indeed used the twelve tribes tradition to lay claim to an Israelite identity from a place outside of Israel, after the heyday of the tribes as described, they would be performing a similar action to other "Israels" of the world.

[10] I have elsewhere made a general case for comparing biblical and extrabiblical uses of the same basic traditions on equal terms from the perspective of a comparative mythology (Tobolowsky, "The Hebrew Bible as Mythic 'Vocabulary,'" 459). I call these "two-way" comparisons – in which we use two examples of the use of a tradition, in anything from literature, to art, to film, not so that one can illuminate the other but so that each can tell us about both. This is by no means an unheard of form of comparison, but it is quite rare when biblical traditions are involved.

[11] For a discussion of how the cultural "hegemony of the biblical" is often inaccurately applied, in scholarship, to biblical texts before the period when they gained cultural ascendancy over other traditions, see Mroczek, "The Hegemony of the Biblical"; Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity*. As for scripture, as Dexter E. Callender Jr. and William Scott Green observe, in a similarly-minded discussion not of scripture and tradition but scripture and "myth," it "is a generic native category that biblical based religions use to depict themselves, though some scholars apply it to other

Other concerns, however, have more to them. Biblical accounts of tribal history are significantly older than any others I will discuss, except, perhaps, some of the Samaritan traditions in Chapter 2, and they are closer to the actual world of the tribes. In many cases, they likely do have more of history about them than the majority of Lost Tribe traditions which may be – in Tudor Parfitt's recent, blunt summary – "nothing but a myth."[12] At the very least, no Lost Tribe claim to descent from ancient Israel has yet passed a scholarly standard for empirically demonstrable truth. This difference between "history" and "myth," dull instruments as these terms may be, can be important, especially to the historian.[13]

Strange as it may seem, however, we no longer think that there is so much difference between ethnic traditions that have something of history about them and those which, under the historian's gaze, seem to have less.[14] Fundamentally, stories about the past that are believed to be true operate in the same way whether or not they actually are. And of course, there is no evidence that any of the "Israelites" discussed in this book hold or feel their Israelite identity any less deeply or sincerely than the ancient Israelites themselves. So, questions of ethnic truth or fiction seem to be of far greater interest as pure academic concerns than as aspects of our lived reality. Meanwhile, even when we know a given story about the past is true, or partially based on real events, we can still ask why it is being told rather than another one, perhaps equally true but neglected, and we can still ask how its telling is shaped by the context and occasion that gave it birth.[15]

religions as well" (Callender Jr. and Green, "Introduction: Scholarship Between Myth and Scripture," 1).

[12] Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel*, 1. "The fact is that over the last two thousand years, plenty of evidence of different sorts has been presented as proof of the continuing existence of the Lost Tribes. As far as I am concerned none of it is satisfactory as evidence. That is the standard view of scholars throughout the academic world."

[13] Here, I refer to conventional understandings of these categories – though not necessarily scholarly understandings – where history is something with a truth aspect and myth is something largely without it. An extended discussion of either term is far beyond the scope of this introduction, and certainly of a footnote, but my own sense is that the two terms increasingly refer to similar concepts. See Tobolowsky, "History, Myth, and the Shrinking of Genre Borders." See also the discussion in Tobolowsky, *The Sons of Jacob*, 203–6.

[14] Jonathan M. Hall refers to the now "sterile debate between ethnic truth and ethnic fiction" in his study of the construction of ancient Greek ethnicity over time (Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*, 19).

[15] Often, especially where ancient Israel is concerned, scholarship on descriptions of the tribes of Israel understands the ability to *represent* and to *express* in opposition to each other. That is, the idea is that if an account is true, it simply represents the past, rather

Developments like these certainly crack the door open to re-evaluating the long-operating distinction between biblical and nonbiblical tribal traditions in scholarship on the subject. The hammer that breaks the silos, however, was forged somewhere else. The haft is made out of an entirely underappreciated feature of the myth of the twelve tribes of Israel, which, for the rest of this book, I will more often refer to as the "twelve tribes tradition." The head is shaped by a new way of thinking about biblical traditions themselves, which makes these appear far more similar to "other" Israelite histories than anyone previously suspected – although this particular ramification has not yet been recognized.

First, then, the twelve tribes tradition is of a particular type known as a "segmented" genealogical tradition. The term is usually defined in contrast to "linear" genealogies which are those that follow a single line of descent, father to son or mother to daughter, typically to legitimate the current claimant to a throne, priesthood, or similar.[16] "Segmented" genealogies are those that follow multiple lines of descent at once instead, like a family tree.[17] The familiar biblical sequence, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is a linear genealogy, while – of course – the genealogy of the twelve sons of Jacob is segmented.

Segmented genealogical traditions have been a focal point of my scholarship nearly as much as the twelve tribes tradition has, and they are fascinating structures. I have often argued that a lack of attention to how segmented frameworks operate as ethnic charter myths has seriously inhibited scholarly analysis of biblical tribal traditions, and I will explore this topic again in the first chapter.[18] In the larger arc of this study, however, the functionality of segmented systems has another significance. It is the hidden filament that connects each act of "becoming Israel" to all the rest – because it is the hidden engine that makes "becoming Israel" go.

than expressing an ideology, "representation" being a key term in the study of history. However, as Megan Bishop Moore observes, even though objectivity can be a "regulative ideal" in modern historiographies, "history writing still requires historians to make decisions and value-judgements that are necessarily subjective to some degree" (Moore, *Philosophy and Practice*, 9–10). And this refers to modern historians – how much more so for those ancient historians who may have been "bound loosely to a historical past by their source material but untroubled by modern epistemological concerns birthed only in the past three centuries" (Pioske, *Memory in a Time of Prose*, 15).

[16] See, for example, Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, 114–24, 132.

[17] Tobolowsky, *The Sons of Jacob*, 4.

[18] Especially in Tobolowsky, *The Sons of Jacob*; Tobolowsky, "The Problem of Reubenite Primacy."

There are many things to say about segmented systems, and I will hopefully say them throughout the book, but we need to understand that they are not stable *statements* of identity, they are negotiable claims about them, or maybe, an ongoing medium through which negotiable claims can be made. We can see this already in the book of Genesis. There is no good reason that the sons of Isaac, Jacob and Esau are the ancestors of two different peoples – Jacob of Israel, Esau of the Edomites (Gen. 25:30, 36:1–9) – while all twelve of Jacob's sons are one people. This is simply what the text says. And comparative examples tell us that the roads not taken in one articulation of identity can be taken in the next. One day, the Edomites and the Israelites might decide that they are one people after all, having descended from brothers just as surely as Reuben and Simeon did.[19] Or, the Reubenites might decide that they are *simply* Reubenites, not Reubenites and Israelites.[20] Or, the members of a given segmented framework might do a little reorganizing. In Gen. 29–30, the twelve sons of Jacob are born to four different women, Rachel, Leah, and their enslaved women Bilhah and Zilpah. Under the right circumstances, the Bilhahites might decide that they have had just about enough of the Leahites – and so on. The flexible structure segmentation provides makes all these reorientations, emancipations, and reorganizations possible.

Where "Lost Tribe" traditions are concerned, the essential feature of the segmented framework of Israelite identity is also its most obvious one: that segmented systems give permanent expression to the idea that many different groups are also, simultaneously, one group without losing their distinctiveness. The fact that Israel was born divided – so to speak – is what allows it to *be* divided, even across the world. The fact that Israel

[19] As Bruce Lincoln observes, "basic to the segmentary pattern is the principle of fission and fusion whereby the members of a total social field can recombine at different levels of integration to form aggregates of varying size … To take an arbitrary example, when a man of lineage 1 struggles with a man of lineage 2, they invoke Ancestors 1 and 2 respectively … When the time arrives to make peace, however, they invoke Ancestor A together: the figure through whose recollection may be formed that social group in which they are reunited" (Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 19–20). When we think of "Ancestor A" as Jacob and "1 and 2" as, say, Ephraim and Judah, we see what we are dealing with here. There were instances in which "1 and 2" were opposed to each other in biblical history, but the prevailing vision of "all Israel" suggests that no recombinations occurred as a result.

[20] Some biblical texts suggest that these kinds of disaggregations happened, and notably the famous "shibboleth" episode in Judges 12, where Manassites are able to identify, and kill, Ephraimites on the basis of a difference in pronunciation. By and large, however, it is Israel and not the individual tribes that matter, and this is universally true in nonbiblical traditions.

was always understood as a conglomeration of different groups allows these various Israels to go on being different from each other, sometimes very different indeed. And the fact that Israel always had many different heirs at once is what allows so many different stories to co-exist, in so many different places. In short, the ability to explain that Reuben and Simeon are different, but both Israel, is also the ability to explain how the Mormons who are the subject of Chapter 4 and the Beta Israel who are the subject of Chapter 5 are different, but both Israel.[21]

Here is where recent scholarship on the Hebrew Bible's own accounts of Israelite history comes in. Today, we increasingly recognize that similar explanations are needed to make biblical history *itself* seem like an Israelite history – though, again, it has never been put quite this way before. First, even the Hebrew Bible itself admits that, upon the death of the mighty Solomon, the twelve tribes of Israel were permanently split between two different historical kingdoms, Israel and Judah (1 Kgs. 11–12), never to be reunited. Second, scholars have broadly acknowledged that the major developments that produced not only the Hebrew Bible as a whole, but its two lengthy narrative histories – the so-called "Primary History" spanning Genesis through Kings, and the "Secondary History" of Chronicles – occurred in Judah, not Israel, and only some time between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, which is to say, between roughly 350 and 550 years since Solomon is supposed to have ruled.[22]

In a sense, then, the fact that what survives is really "Judah's Bible," as Daniel Fleming recently put it, is not exactly news.[23] What is new, however, is a raft of changes in how we think about identity, tradition, and memory that force us to reckon with what the relatively late, Judahite origins of the biblical accounts of Israelite history and identity really means.[24] Basically, we can no longer deny that if a narrative account

[21] As Malkin notes, segmented genealogies are "open to free manipulation and conflicting claims" and "capable ... of differentiating and relating nations at the same time" (Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus*, 61).

[22] Whether Solomon is a historical figure is a difficult question that I will address to some extent in the first chapter, but if he was king of Israel, it would have been in the tenth century BCE.

[23] Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah's Bible*.

[24] The bibliography on this topic is vast and will be touched on at various points throughout this book. Some of the studies that I rely on throughout include Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*; Malkin, *The Returns of Odysseus*; Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups*; Brubaker, *Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity*; Malešević, *The Sociology of Ethnicity*; Gil-White, "How Thick Is Blood?"; Crouch, *The Making of Israel*; Miller, "Ethnicity and the Hebrew Bible."

emerged in sixth through fourth century BCE Judah it *is* a sixth through fourth century BCE Judahite narrative.[25] Which means it reflects what Judahites living in this period thought Israel was, and to some extent, wanted it to be, and that theirs is a fundamentally Judahite vision.[26]

This is not to say that none of the traditions preserved in the Hebrew Bible are based on even much earlier ones, or for that matter, are Israelite rather than Judahite. In fact, my suspicion is that early Israelite traditions – and early Judahite traditions – are preserved better in the Hebrew Bible than in most other narratives based on older materials. There is a certain oddity in how much of the Primary History especially is composed, more through a kind of collage than a free composition.[27] The result is a multivocalic account that often contradicts, but also presumably preserves the literal wording of source materials, and a diversity of opinion, in a way and to an extent that is quite unusual.

In my own work, however, I have compared the problem of the biblical accounts of history, especially the Primary History, to the problem of the museum exhibit.[28] No one has to deny that these contain real artifacts, even from very ancient periods, and even in a good state of preservation, in order to recognize the primary role the curators who design the exhibit play in how we understand it. It is *their* exhibit, not the artifacts' own. The curators choose what to include, they organize it, they arrange it, they interpret it. Different curators can make very different exhibits even with the same artifacts, and of course, have. And if we somehow could not recognize that here, we will learn it, over and over again, throughout

[25] As Fleming put it, "the inheritance of Israelite material takes place after the realm was definitely called Judah and may be considered literally Judahite" (Fleming, *The Legacy of Israel in Judah's Bible*, 4).

[26] As Ian Douglas Wilson observes, "there is no doubt that many of these works have their roots in much earlier periods, and that they underwent long, complex processes of scribal reception, editing, and expansion that took place over centuries." Nevertheless, the biblical books in question are "representative of a particular discursive horizon, located across the fifth to early third centuries BCE" (Wilson, *Kingship and Memory in Ancient Judah*, 6, 10).

[27] This mode of composition may be totally unique. Although scholars such as Jeffrey Tigay have drawn attention to the existence of editorial seams in Gilgamesh, for example, as Seth Sanders points out, these seams in Near Eastern literature tend towards adding context and explaining further, while in the biblical narrative they often make things more confusing (Tigay, *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*; Sanders, "What If There Aren't Any Empirical Models for Pentateuchal Criticism?"). It also means the Hebrew Bible likely preserves a number of different perspectives better than other similar texts.

[28] Tobolowsky, "The Primary History as Museum Exhibit."

this book. There are worse ways to think about all these Israels of the world than as different exhibits of the same basic artifacts.

Additionally, by the time the mid-sixth century rolled around – again, just about the earliest date most contemporary scholars can imagine something like the biblical vision of history existing – a series of dramatic changes had occurred in the region. To be clear, even in the era when the two kingdoms co-existed, the books of Kings describe frequent wars between them, bitter conflicts that sometimes seem more the rule than the exception.[29] But the kingdom of Israel was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE, and Judah itself, by Babylon in 586. Both conquests were accompanied by significant deportations away to Mesopotamia which, if not so complete as the Bible itself suggests, were significant nonetheless.[30]

Then, in 539 BCE, Persia would conquer Babylon, inaugurating at once the "Persian period" itself and the era of various "Returns" from Babylonian Exile. All of these, and many other events besides are of the sort that scholars of identity broadly agree dramatically reshape how peoples understand themselves.[31] Some key events in Judahite history did not even meaningfully include the Israelites, the Babylonian Exile among them, which many regard as a formative experience.[32] But even more prepossessing is the math. I count myself among the scholars who think the Persian period was the true crucible in which the biblical visions

[29] There was war, we are told, "all the days" of Rehoboam and Jeroboam (1 Kgs. 14:30). There was war all the days of Rehoboam's son Abijam (1 Kgs. 15:6), and after Abijam, "there was war between Asa and King Baasha of Israel all their days" (1 Kgs. 15:16). Jehoash, a later king of Israel, defeated Amaziah of Judah so badly that he broke down the wall of Jerusalem, which is typically the act of a conqueror attempting to prevent a new vassal from staging a rebellion (2 Kgs. 14:13). And in the end, the Assyrians may well have come down against Israel at the invitation of the Judahites, facing a devastating alliance between Israel and the neighboring kingdom of Aram-Damascus. We are told of an alliance between Rezin of Aram and Pekah, king of Israel, against the Judahites, and that in time they came to besiege Jerusalem itself (2 Kgs. 16:5). In response, Ahaz of Judah sent a request for aid to Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria, along with a large amount of gold and silver, in response to which Tiglath-Pileser conquered Damascus (2 Kgs. 16:7–9). If a real event, this would have occurred less than two decades before the Assyrian conquest of Israel, and it is difficult not to connect the two.

[30] As we will see in Chapter 2, the 2 Kings 17 account of the Assyrian conquest, which is the real origin point for the "Lost Tribes of Israel" tradition, dramatically overstates how many Israelites were exiled to Assyria.

[31] As Carly L. Crouch notes, "there are perhaps as many specific kinds of social change which might impel the explicit articulation of identity discourse as there are ethnic groups" (Crouch, *The Making of Israel*, 97).

[32] Knoppers, *Jews and Samaritans*, 121.