

SIMEON, THE TENTH TRIBE OF ISRAEL

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Early in the reign of Rehoboam the nation of Israel was divided into two parts. The northern division continued to use the name Israel, and the southern took the name Judah, after its principal tribe. The northern nation is commonly and correctly spoken of as being composed of ten tribes and the southern of two. This numerical division finds Biblical basis in the act of the prophet, Ahijah, when he announced to Jeroboam that he would be the first king of this northern division (I Kings 11:28-39). Ahijah met Jeroboam in a field, took his own "new garment," and rent it into twelve pieces. He took ten of these and gave them to Jeroboam saying that God had given ten tribes to him over which he was to rule.

When we examine the identity of these ten tribes, however, a question arises. On the basis of the original division of the land among the twelve tribes, only nine fall into the areas of the northern kingdom: Ephraim, Manasseh, Issachar, Zebulun, Naphtali, Asher, Dan, Reuben, and Gad. Who was the tenth tribe of the northern kingdom?

The answer must lie in connection with one of the other three tribes: Judah, Benjamin, or Simeon. Since both Judah and Benjamin are regularly mentioned as belonging to the southern kingdom,¹ the answer seems to be further narrowed to Simeon. Is it possible that Simeon came to be reckoned as belonging to the northern block of tribes? Actually, Simeon's inheritance was the *southernmost* of all the tribes. How could this tribe have come to be aligned with Jeroboam's kingdom? Yet there is reason to believe that it was. Several matters are involved which lead to this conclusion and their identity and significance can best be seen in the light of a brief historical sketch.

The man Simeon, progenitor of the tribe, was born to Leah as Jacob's second son (Gen. 29:33). Nothing is known about him until he, with Levi the next youngest brother, championed the cause of Dinah, their younger sister, as over against Shechem, son of Hamor, of the city of Shechem, who desired Dinah for his wife (Gen. 34). Through a trick,

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1. Strangely, Ahijah mentioned to Jeroboam only one tribe, namely Judah, as comprising the southern kingdom (I Kings 11:32, 36). Otherwise, however, both Judah and Benjamin are regularly mentioned; e.g. I Kings 12:21, 23; II Chronicles 11:1, 3, 10, 12, 23; 14:8; 15:2, 8, 9; etc. Also, in that Ahijah had torn the garment into twelve pieces and given only ten to Jeroboam indicates that two belonged to the southern kingdom.

the two succeeded in massacring all the men of the city of Shechem including the man Shechem and his father Hamor. As a result, Jacob found it necessary to move his family from the vicinity of Shechem due to the bitterness felt by neighbors. Simeon next was involved in recorded history when he was selected by Joseph, then prime minister of Egypt, to be hostage for Benjamin, insuring that the other brothers would bring the youngest son with them when they came the next time to buy corn (Gen. 42:24, 36; 43:23). Then in Jacob's dying blessing on his sons, he said of Simeon and Levi together that they were "instruments of cruelty" and that he would "divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel" (Gen. 49:5-7).

When Jacob took his family to Egypt, Simeon was father of six sons (Gen. 46:10). By the time of the exodus from Egypt, the family had grown to be the third largest, numbering 59,300 (Num. 1:23).² This number, however, had decreased most noticeably by the time of entry into Canaan to 22,200 (Num. 26:14), making them then the smallest tribe. It is possible that a major reason for this decline lay in connection with punishment relative to sin with the Midianitish women at Baal-peor (Num. 25). Moses gave order at God's direction that all who participated in this sin should be killed. This destruction of life was stopped only when a certain man named Zimri was killed in the act of sinning with one of the foreign women. He is called a man that was "a prince of a chief house among the Simeonites" (v. 14). In that the slaying was stopped only when this man was killed, it follows that he must have been a leader in this defection. Since he was a prince in the Simeon tribe, that tribe may have been the main one involved in this sin and suffered the greatest loss of life as punishment.

A further noteworthy matter is that, when the land of Canaan was divided among the tribes, Simeon was treated differently than the others. Simeon was not given a separate area of land, but was assigned only cities "within the inheritance of the children of Judah" (Josh. 19:1). Eighteen cities "with their villages" are listed as so assigned, all in the southern area of Judah (Josh. 19:1-9; I Chron. 4:28-33); cities which earlier, at the time of Judah's allotment, are listed as belonging to that tribe (Josh. 15:26-32, 42). Simeon cooperated with Judah in subduing their mutual territory (Judg. 1:3, 17). Then, showing further the close tie of Simeon with Judah, when the forty-eight Levitic cities were chosen out of all the tribes as the possession of the priests and Levites, the nine taken from Judah and Simeon are listed without distinction between the two tribes (Josh. 21:9-16), whereas each other tribe has its cities designated separately.

These matters demonstrate that Simeon was given a humble position among the tribes, one which its members must have found difficult to

2. The two larger were Judah with 74,600 and Dan with 62,700.

understand and accept. This status was yet further accented by the fact that Simeon alone was omitted by Moses in his pronouncements of blessing on the various tribes (Deut. 33).

What was the cause of this? The full answer is not revealed, but a significant part is to be found in Simeon's action, along with Levi, in tricking and killing the people of Shechem. Because of this action, Jacob had found it necessary to remove his family from the vicinity of Shechem, and he certainly remembered the occasion when later he gave his "blessings" on his sons. As noted, he referred to Simeon and Levi together, saying that they would be "divided in Jacob and scattered in Israel." This scattering transpired in respect to Levi when Levi was selected as the priestly tribe and was given no land to inherit. Instead, Levi was divided out and scattered in forty-eight cities belonging to, and distributed evenly among, the other tribes. There was honor, of course, for Levi in being chosen as the priestly tribe; but still, being so chosen, Jacob's prediction came true in this scattering.

Jacob's prediction in respect to Simeon apparently was intended by God to be fulfilled, at least in part, by this tribe being assigned merely cities in Judah. The tribe was not given land of her own, even as Levi, but was scattered in Judah. Why Simeon's manner of being scattered should have been of this humiliating kind, whereas that of Levi was honoring, is not clear. Some part of the answer may lie in connection with Simeon's possible lead in the sin at Baal-peor, as noted. Simeon had found a partner in Levi with the earlier infraction (being older, he may have been the leader in this), but apparently did not here.

With this background in mind, we may now move on to see evidence that Simeon did come to be reckoned as one of the ten tribes of the northern kingdom. Two passages particularly are significant. One is II Chronicles 15:9: "And he (Asa) gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and the strangers with them out of Ephraim and Manasseh, and out of Simeon: for they fell to him out of Israel in abundance, when they saw that the LORD his God was with him." The subject in this text is revival as prompted by the prophet Azariah, son of Oded (15:1). Asa responded to the prophet's urging, cleansed Judah and Benjamin of their idols (v. 8), and called people into Jerusalem to enter "into a covenant to seek the LORD God of their fathers with all their heart and with all their soul" (v. 12). The people called were first from Judah and Benjamin, the two tribes belonging to the northern kingdom, but then from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon. Ephraim and Manasseh were tribes of the northern kingdom, of course. Earlier, in Jeroboam's day, many who wanted to worship properly had left the northern kingdom and come to Jerusalem (II Chron. 11:16). Now they were doing so again. The significant item here is that people came also from Simeon. Two matters argue that Simeon, as here mentioned, is thought of as coming from the north and not the south.

First, Simeon is listed in parallel with the two northern tribes as "strangers" (*garim*) and not with Judah and Benjamin; and second, the significant explanation follows the listing of these three tribes, "For they fell to him out of Israel in abundance," suggesting that all three were indeed from Israel.

The other passage is II Chronicles 34:6. It is similar in import. At the time involved, Josiah was king of Judah and the date was over two centuries later than the prior instance. Since the earlier time, the northern kingdom had fallen to Assyria. Josiah, like Asa, was also cleansing the land from false objects of worship. He removed Baal altars, asherim, high places, carved images, and molten images, and even burned bones of the false priests on their altars. He did this first in Judah and then continued in tribes to the north. In verse 6 it is stated, "And so he did in the cities of Manasseh, and Ephraim, and Simeon, even unto Naphtali." Here again Simeon is listed parallel with Manasseh and Ephraim as though one of the tribes of the north. Further, this time Naphtali is mentioned as the direction in which Josiah's outreach was moving, and so, with Simeon designated after Manasseh and Ephraim, it follows that Simeon was thought of as lying still north of these two tribes, perhaps at the northern part of Manasseh where one would move on to Naphtali still further north.³

These passages give convincing evidence that Simeon had moved, at least in substantial part, to live in the northern kingdom, and probably along the northern border of the territory of Manasseh.

Not all of Simeon had moved, however. This is sure, for an episode recorded in I Chronicles 4:39-43 puts some Simeonites still in the southern region in the time of Hezekiah, whose reign fell in date between the two occasions just cited. Simeonites, whose lineage is given in the immediately preceding verses (24-38), moved to the "entrance of Gedor" to seek better pasture for their flocks. They found the pasture, but had to fight Hamites to get it. They continued living in the region for many years, at least until the time of writing I Chronicles (v. 41). Sometime during this residency a group of five hundred waged further war against Amalekites in Mt. Seir, the purpose of which is not given (vv. 42-43). Just where the region of Gedor was located is not known, but it was somewhere in the south at least, for from it this attack against Mt. Seir was possible.

A further note should be taken from this southern episode before making a summary of the over-all picture. This movement in the south suggests the same spirit of transiency on the part of Simeonites, as

3. The tribe of Issachar lay between Manasseh and Naphtali. Being unmentioned, apparently Simeon did not occupy any of this territory. Naphtali is mentioned as the direction in which the outreach was moving, rather than Issachar, because Naphtali was the tribe furthest north.

implied for the movement northward. It would take a spirit of transiency for them to want to move in such numbers to Manasseh, but this stated movement in the south supports the fact that they had it. Apparently the people were not satisfied to remain where they had been assigned; this likely due in considerable part to the humiliating status given them. Also, southern Judah can be very arid and dry, and the people could have wanted more productive land. This is in keeping with their move to Gedor to find better pasture. If Simeonites did have this spirit of transiency, it would be in keeping further with Jacob's prediction. Not only did God intend that they be scattered in separate cities of Judah, but to have a spirit of movement which in due time would lead them to be scattered much further.

The over-all picture of what has been seen looks as follows. Due to prior sin, and in accordance with Jacob's consequent prediction, the tribe of Simeon was given a humiliating status among the other tribes.⁴ The tribe was given only separate cities within Judah, truly scattered in land not her own. She was humiliated further in not having been mentioned by Moses in his closing pronouncements of blessings on all the other tribes. Still further, she was now the smallest tribe in number after once being the third largest.

This led to unhappiness and this in turn to a desire to move in an attempt to improve her position, in keeping with Jacob's prediction. Simeonites had the example of Danites in carrying out this desire, for already in the period of the judges many of this fellow tribe had moved to the extreme north of the land (Judg. 18). It is not likely that Simeonites moved in significant number this early, however, for yet in the reign of David their tribe supplied more men for David's army than Judah (7,100 to 6,800; I Chron. 12:24-35). But sometime after this, they did move, some to other areas of the south, as illustrated by the group which went to Gedor in Hezekiah's time, but mainly to the north, the area of Manasseh, as the two passages noted in II Chronicles show. This must have happened during the reign of Solomon, for it was at the close of his rule that Ahijah came to Jeroboam and gave him the ten pieces of the rent garment. The number that did move at that time must have been the majority of the tribe in order to account for Ahijah's action.

4. Simeon's humiliation in this Old Testament time did not keep her from being listed with the other tribes in having her 12,00 sealed in Revelation 7:7, however. The tribe of Dan is omitted.