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The Ten Tribes at Athens

By E. Reep

AS there is good reason for believing that Greece was largely colonised by Israelites of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the statement of Pausanias and Xenophon, that at Athens there were ten tribes, is at least curious ; but not more curious than the assertion of Josephus that the Lacedaemonians were related to, the Jews. It was the common origin of the Spartans and the Jews that induced Jonathan, the Jewish high priest, to press on the Lacedaemonians the wisdom of an alliance for mutual protection against Demetrius of Macedonia (*Antiq.* XIII., v. 8). In former times, a Lacedaemonian king had made similar overtures to the Jews, stating in his letter—sealed with an eagle with a dragon in its claws—that the concerns of the Jewish people were the affairs also of the Spartan people. Onias, the high priest of that date, had satisfied himself of the truth of this by consulting the sacred writings, apparently now lost to us. So the Lacedaemonians and the Jews were well pleased to make a league of friendship and to consider themselves brethren.

In describing Athens, Pausanias mentions the Rotunda, in which, among other things, were some statues of the heroes from whom the tribes of the Athenians in later times got their names. Originally there were, he says, but four tribes; but these, when they became ten, changed their names, as told by Herodotus.

When Xenophon wrote his Treatise "On the Government of Athens," the Ten Tribes had become a powerful democracy. Athens possessing fine and safe harbours, the Athenians naturally aspired to the command of the sea. It was their maritime ascendancy, their trade intercourse with Egypt,

Cyprus, Sicily, Italy, and other countries, that made them, of all the Greeks, the most nourishing. Luxuries were not enjoyed by the few, but by the whole people. As to sacrifices, and temples, and festivals, and consecrated groves, says Xenophon, the people, knowing that it is impossible for every poor man to make offerings and feasts, have discovered by what means these privileges may be secured to them. The State accordingly sacrifices many victims at the public expense, while it is the people that feast on them and distribute them among themselves by lot. Xenophon here describes a purely Semitic system of sacrifice. Among early Semites there was a general prohibition of private slaughter; no slaughter was legitimate except for sacrifice. Thus all Semitic sacrifice was originally the act of the community [Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*.]

From Homer we get no mention of ten tribes in the Athenian state. He refers, however, to a custom among the Greeks of dividing their troops into companies of ten each—"All ranked by tens" (Pope's *Il.* II., 126), with which has been compared Judges xx. 10.

Like the Israelite polity, the Athenian constitution aimed at being an ideal one. Free government was the just right of the people; it was but just that all freemen should be represented, and thus have a voice in the making of laws affecting the commonwealth. So thoroughly democratic was the constitution, that the upper classes enjoyed no greater political privileges than the poorer; all alike shared the burden of service to the state. Such a form of government was thought to be the only one conducive to general prosperity, strength, and freedom. Even the unenfranchised slave was conceded the most liberal rights, as well as a certain degree of equality with the free citizen. In this way the ten tribes at Athens anticipated the modern and beneficent government of British-Israel, and more particularly that of the Australian Commonwealth, in which the dominant element is the industrial community.

The Athenians seem to have preserved many Israelite identities. Their method of computing days from sunset to sunset, and reckoning by nights instead of days, was Mosaic (Our Gothic and Keltic forefathers had

the same custom.) That many of their laws were purely Hebraic has been observed over and over again. The Semitic influence traceable in Greek mythology had the greatest interest for Mr. Gladstone, who, as a Bible student, could not fail to remark Hebrew parallels in Greek myths. The poems of Homer he considered a complement of the earliest portion of the sacred records. (See *Studies on Homer.*)

Gen. xx. 12 shows a peculiar mode of contracting marriage. It prevailed at Athens. It was lawful to marry a sister by the father's side; but it was not permitted to marry a sister by the same mother. When Abraham said that Sarah was his sister, he was speaking the truth; she was his sister, the daughter of his father, his half-sister. This custom, with that of a brother taking the widow of a deceased brother, probably gave rise to the notion among foreign writers that the ancient Britons had a community of wives.

A curious Hebrew Nazarite practice (Num. vi.) is seen in the feast at which the Athenians sacrificed the hair of their children to Diana. The ceremony of shaving the head, and the drink-offerings, &c., were either in imitation of the Nazarite law, or the Athenians were related, like the Lacedaemonians, to the Jews (*Joseph. Antiq.* XII. iv. 10; XIII. v. 8; I Macc. xii. 21).

"The revenger of blood shall slay the murderer when he meeteth him" (Num. xxxv. 21) has been compared with the *Iliad* IX. 628. The Greeks, like the Israelites, left the punishment of the murderer to the relations of the victims. And again, Deut. xvi. 14—where we read: "Thou shalt rejoice in thy feast, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy maidservant"—resembles the Athenian law, which enacted that the master of every family should, after harvest, make a feast for his servants and eat together with them. At such gatherings there would, of course, be recited and sung the exploits of heroes and ancestors.

The species of poetry in use among the Greeks had, according to Dr. Lowth (*Hebrew Poetry*), a surprising analogy, both in plot and conduct, to the historical Psalms of the Israelites. Greek philosophers

have been also credited by Aristobulus (B.C. 170—150) with having taken their philosophy from the Hebrews. Thus it was, perhaps, that Philo-Judaeus was also concerned, to show that the writings of Moses contained Greek philosophy. Philo follows in his allegorical method, says Dr. Hatch (Hibbert Lectures), not a Hebrew, but a Greek method. He expressly speaks of it as the method of the Greek mysteries. Is it not credible, then, that the Ten Tribes at Athens, and those Greeks who divided their territory in true Israelite fashion into twelve parts—who, in fact, were governed in everything by the figure twelve; who at the same time gave Semitic names to their towns and villages, and were in so many respects steeped in Semitic influences—were of Israel; of that House of Israel of whom it shall be said in the latter days, "Ye are the sons of the living God" (Hos. i. 10)? St. Paul's acknowledgment of the God of the Greeks as his God (Acts xvii. 23) is, in a measure, an answer to this question, notwithstanding that he considered the Athenians were ignorantly worshipping the God of his fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), though their own poets had declared them to be His offspring. But, whatever St. Paul's belief in the matter, it remains a fact that the manners and customs of the ancient Greeks were the manners and customs of the Ten-tribed House of Israel.