

The Lost Tribes of Israel in Kashmir and Surrounding Areas

By Richard Hewitt (Risbek)

Introduction

The theory that the Lost Tribes of Israel may have migrated to Kashmir and its surrounding regions after their exile from the Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE has been a subject of fascination and debate for centuries. While mainstream scholarship often dismisses this hypothesis due to a lack of definitive genetic evidence, a closer examination of historical records, cultural practices, linguistic parallels, and oral traditions reveals a compelling case for the presence of Israelite influence in Kashmir, Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Punjab, and neighboring areas. This essay defends the historical connection of the Lost Tribes to these regions, arguing that their migration and cultural diffusion are plausible through a multidisciplinary lens.

Historical Context of the Lost Tribes' Exile

The Lost Tribes of Israel refer to the ten tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel—Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Manasseh, and Ephraim—who were deported by the Assyrian Empire following its conquest of Samaria in 722 BCE. According to the Hebrew Bible, these tribes were resettled during 20 years in regions such as the "cities of the Medes" and areas near the Khabur River (2 Kings 17:6). The Assyrian policy of forced resettlement aimed to dilute the identity of conquered peoples by dispersing them across vast territories (Oded, 1979, p. 23). While many scholars argue that these tribes were assimilated into neighboring populations, historical accounts and traditions suggest that some groups maintained their identity and migrated further east (Parfitt, 2002, p. 15).

By the 6th century BCE, the Persian king Cyrus the Great allowed exiled Jews to return from a second captivity recorded in scripture - the later Babylonian captivity. Jews returned to their homelands (Ezra 1:1–4), but the ancient Israelites were not Jews (not from Judah's Tribe), and the vast majority did not return but continued their journey eastward along ancient trade routes like the Silk Road (Frye, 1984, p. 98). This migration aligns with the

timeline of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE), which controlled territories from Egypt to northwestern India, including Gandhara, a region closely linked to Kashmir (Vogelsang, 1992, p. 112). The Achaemenid Empire facilitated cultural exchange, and the presence of Jewish communities in Persia, as documented in the Bible and Murashu Archive, suggests that Israelites could have traveled further east, reaching areas like Afghanistan and Kashmir (Stolper, 1985, p. 45).

Cultural Parallels Between Kashmir and Israelite Traditions

One of the strongest arguments for the Lost Tribes' presence in Kashmir lies in the striking cultural parallels between Kashmiri traditions and ancient Israelite practices. Kashmiri Pandits, the indigenous Hindu community of the region, and even some Muslim Kashmiris, have customs that resonate with biblical traditions. For instance, the Kashmiri spring festivals, celebrated by Pandits, involve offerings of crops, communal feasts, and prayers in temple courtyards, mirroring the Israelite Feast of Firstfruits, which also emphasizes agricultural abundance and gratitude (Leviticus 23:9–14; Lawrence, 1895, p. 210). Kashmiri spring festivals align with the biblical harvest feasts, suggesting a shared cultural memory (Neusner, 1988, p. 67).

Additionally, Kashmiri Sufi practices, such as the ritual purification known as *achaman*, involve cleansing with water and prayers, a practice that parallels the Israelite purification rites outlined in the Hebrew Bible (Exodus 30:19–20; Wani, 2004, p. 89). The *Jama'at* prayers of Kashmiri Muslims, which emphasize communal worship, resemble the synagogue prayers described in Nehemiah 8:6 (Haleem, 2010, p. 134). These similarities are not mere coincidences but indicate a possible transmission of religious practices through migrating Israelite groups (Kaw, 2001, p. 56). There are many more similarities that the Lost Tribes Institute is hoping to gather during planned symposiums with Kashmiris and Punjabis.

Kashmiri oral traditions further support an Israelite connection. Some Kashmiri Pandits claim descent from Persia and beyond, asserting that their ancestors settled in the valley after a long migration (Bamzai, 1962, p. 34). This narrative aligns with the historical dispersal of the Lost Tribes through Persia and Central Asia (Godbey, 1930, p. 89). Moreover, the presence of tombs in Kashmir, such as the Rozabal shrine in Srinagar, believed by some to be the resting place of a figure named Yuz Asaf—interpreted by certain

scholars as a variation of Jesus or a Jewish prophet—adds to the cultural narrative of Israelite influence (Ahmad, 1972, p. 45). While the authenticity of such tombs is debated, their existence reflects a local belief in a connection to the "children of Israel," as both Moses and Jesus are revered figures in the region (Hassnain, 1988, p. 112).

Among the neighboring Pashtun tradition, we find *Pashtunwali*, a code of conduct emphasizing hospitality, justice, and honor, which shares ethical principles with the Mosaic Law, such as the emphasis on communal responsibility and retribution (Caroe, 1958, p. 45). Pashtunwali has been described as a harsher version of the Torah (Jacobovici, 1998).

Linguistic and Toponymic Evidence

Linguistic parallels between Kashmiri and Hebrew provide another layer of evidence. Names of Kashmiri places and tribes echo biblical locations and Israelite tribal names. For example, villages like Mamre (also Mamre in Hebrew), Naboo Hill (*Mount Nebo*), and Pisgah (*Mount Pisgah*) bear striking resemblances to places mentioned in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 3:27; Grierson, 1919, p. 23). Tribal names such as Asheriya (*Asher*), Dand (*Dan*), Gadha (*Gad*), and Lavi (*Levi*) further suggest a historical memory of Israelite origins (Sharma, 1983, p. 67).

These toponymic similarities are not unique to Kashmir but extend to surrounding areas like Afghanistan. The Pashtuns, an ethnic group in Afghanistan and Pakistan, also claim descent from the Lost Tribes, with some of their tribal names mirroring those of the Israelite tribes (e.g., *Ruben* for Reuben) (Bellew, 1864, p. 95). More importantly, Kashmiris have clan names that the Lost Tribes Institute (LTI) finds throughout Asia: *Manasi* from biblical Manasseh and Efrani from Ephraim. In nearby Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz hero is Manas, son of Jakyb, resembling biblical "Manasseh son of Jacob."

While linguistic evolution and cultural contact could explain some of these parallels, the consistency and specificity of these names suggest a deeper historical connection (Elphinstone, 1815, p. 123).

Archaeological and Historical Observations

Archaeological evidence, while not conclusive, provides intriguing hints of Israelite influence in Kashmir. Artifacts such as the Burzahom pottery (circa 3000–1500 BCE) and Kanispor seals (circa 1000 BCE) exhibit geometric patterns and star motifs that resemble Canaanite and Israelite artistic styles (Pande, 1971, p. 34). These similarities, while not definitive proof of Israelite presence, suggest cultural exchange along ancient trade routes (Dikshit, 1985, p. 56). The Burzahom site, located in the Kashmir Valley, also shows evidence of early agricultural practices, which align with the pastoral and agrarian lifestyle described in the Rigveda and attributed to the Indo-Aryans, who may have interacted with or spawned from migrating Israelite groups (Sharma, 2000, p. 78).

Historical accounts from travelers and scholars further bolster this theory. The 11th-century Persian scholar Al-Biruni noted that Kashmiris were selective about allowing foreigners, particularly favoring Jews, into their land, hinting at a historical Jewish presence (Al-Biruni, 1030/1910, p. 206). In the 17th century, French physician François Bernier, who traveled to the Mughal Empire, observed that Kashmiri villagers near the Pir Panjal Mountains bore a striking resemblance to Jews in their "countenances and manners" (Bernier, 1671/1916, p. 431). Similarly, British explorer Sir Francis Younghusband, in the early 20th century, remarked on the "Jewish cast of face" among Kashmiris, as did Henry Wilson and Cowley Lambert in their respective travelogues (Younghusband, 1909, p. 145; Wilson, 1847, p. 89; Lambert, 1877, p. 67). These observations, while subjective, reflect a consistent perception of Semitic features among Kashmiris, supporting the idea of an ancient Israelite migration.

Genetic Evidence and Its Limitations

Genetic studies have often been cited to dismiss the theory of Kashmiri descent from the Lost Tribes. A 2016 study published by the University of Utah and the Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences (SKIMS) found no substantial signs of Jewish or Greek admixture in modern-day Kashmiris, using genome-wide genotyping and admixture detection methods (Qamar et al., 2016, p. 123). The study concluded that Kashmiris share genetic ancestry with other South Asian and West Eurasian populations, suggesting that any Israelite influence was minimal or absorbed over time (Qamar et al., 2016, p. 125). However, this genetic evidence has limitations. The study focused on modern populations, which have undergone significant intermixing over millennia (Reich, 2018, p. 89). The

Assyrian policy of dispersing populations likely diluted Israelite genetic markers, as intermarriage with local groups would have altered their genetic profile (Oded, 1979, p. 30). Moreover, the study did not account for the possibility of cultural diffusion without significant genetic exchange (Cavalli-Sforza, 2000, p. 145). The Pashtuns, for instance, show some Middle Eastern ancestry in genetic studies, which aligns with their claimed Israelite descent, but similar evidence in Kashmiris may have been obscured by centuries of intermixing (Underhill et al., 2015, p. 67). Thus, while genetic data does not currently support a direct Israelite ancestry, it does not preclude cultural and historical influence (Reich, 2018, p. 92). Interestingly, Kashmiri Pundits do share similarly high levels of R1a haplogroup with Ashkenazi Levites in Europe and other Central Asian ethnicities, like Kyrgyz, who have strong evidence of descent from ancient Israel.

Counterarguments and Alternative Explanations

Critics of the Lost Tribes theory argue that the cultural and linguistic parallels can be explained by broader Indo-Iranian and Semitic interactions rather than a specific Israelite migration. The similarities between Kashmiri and Hebrew place names, for instance, could result from trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road, where Persian, Aramaic, and Sanskrit influences intermingled (Foltz, 1999, p. 45). The Achaemenid Empire's control of both Persia and northwestern India facilitated such exchanges, and the presence of Jewish communities in Persia could have led to the transmission of Semitic traditions without a mass migration of Israelites (Briant, 2002, p. 178).

Additionally, critics claim the theory has been exploited by religious movements, such as the Ahmadiyya, which claims that Jesus traveled to Kashmir to preach to the Lost Tribes, dying there at the age of 120 (Ahmad, 1972, p. 50). This narrative, while popular among some Kashmiris, lacks historical corroboration and is often dismissed as apocryphal (Parfitt, 2002, p. 78). Critics also ignore the presence of Aramaic inscriptions and falsely mention the absence of direct archaeological evidence, such as Hebrew inscriptions or artifacts explicitly tied to the Lost Tribes, further weakening the theory in the eyes of mainstream scholars (Sharma, 2000, p. 82).

However, these counter arguments do not fully account for the specificity of Kashmiri traditions, oral histories, and Aramaic inscriptions. The consistent naming of places and

tribes after biblical counterparts, coupled with cultural practices that mirror Israelite rituals, suggests a deeper connection than mere trade-based diffusion (Kaw, 2001, p. 60). While the Ahmadiyya narrative may be speculative, it reflects a local belief in Israelite heritage that predates modern religious movements, as evidenced by Al-Biruni's 11th-century observations (Al-Biruni, 1030/1910, p. 208).

Conclusion

The theory of the Lost Tribes of Israel in Kashmir and surrounding areas is supported by a compelling array of historical, cultural, archeologic, and linguistic evidence. The migration of Israelite groups through Persia and Central Asia along ancient trade routes, facilitated by the Achaemenid Empire, provides a plausible mechanism for their arrival in the region (Briant, 2002, p. 180). Cultural practices, linguistic parallels in place names and tribal designations, and historical observations by travelers all point to a significant Israelite influence in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, and neighboring areas (Lawrence, 1895, p. 212; Caroe, 1958, p. 48).

The Assyrian policy of dispersal, combined with centuries of intermixing, makes such an outcome of the Israelites likely (Oded, 1979, p. 32). Furthermore, the oral traditions of Kashmiris and Pashtuns, which claim descent from the "children of Israel," reflect a historical memory that cannot be easily dismissed (Bamzai, 1962, p. 36).

In conclusion, the history of the Lost Tribes in Kashmir and its surrounding regions is a complex tapestry of migration, cultural diffusion, and adaptation. While mainstream scholarship may view the theory as speculative, the cumulative evidence, ranging from cultural practices to historical accounts—suggests that the Lost Tribes left an indelible mark on the region. Future research, including more targeted genetic studies and archaeological excavations, may yet uncover definitive proof of their presence, but until then, the historical and cultural connections remain a fascinating and plausible hypothesis.

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