Tracing the Dispersion

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New linguistic studies help tell us about the scattering of Israel.

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What befell the tribes of Israel's northern kingdom many centuries ago? That question has been asked by students of the scriptures for generations. Like any important historical topic, it is one that deserves careful and thoughtful study.

Reconstructing ancient history, even religious history, can be compared to putting together a large, complex puzzle with many of the pieces missing. One must locate and assemble as many pieces as possible, then form as accurate a picture of the past as the facts allow. In tracing Israel's dispersion, therefore, many pieces may be considered: artifacts, vestiges of ancient customs, archaeology, cultural anthropology, and scriptural and historical accounts. This article explores only one such piece—that of linguistic evidence. 1

Every Language Evolves

Language is a dynamic cultural phenomenon. It changes and grows. In our day, modern technology, the sciences, and the media have accelerated the acquisition of new words but, at the same time, have standardized spelling and pronunciation. In the past, languages acquired new words more slowly, but they were more likely to experience spelling and pronunciation changes. Some of these changes took only decades; others took centuries.

One of the major sources of language change occurs when two groups of people, each speaking a different language, come in contact with one another. Each language influences the other, becoming a catalyst for change and eventually settling into patterns characteristic of the languages prompting the changes. These patterns serve as clues to help a linguist determine what the language was like before the changes took place and which languages caused the changes.

The basic conclusion of linguistic study into this subject is that as large groups of ancient Israelites left their homeland—first, following the Assyrian captivity of northern Israel (about 700 B.C.) and the Babylonian captivity of Judah in the south (about 600 B.C.), and second, following the Roman conquest of Palestine (about A.D. 70)—their language influenced the languages of some of the countries to which they migrated. This linguistic evidence can help us determine where some of these Israelites went and approximately when. Although ancient Israelites were eventually scattered throughout the entire world (see Amos 9:9), at least one general geographical area contains significant linguistic evidence to suggest that Israelite migrations did in fact occur there. That area is Europe.

Linguistic Evidence in Europe

From the Old Testament and other historical sources such as the annals of the Assyrian kings, we learn that the northern kingdom, after years of war and deportation, fell to Assyrian invaders in 721 B.C. Jeremiah emphasized the north countries as being these Israelites' eventual destination (see Jer. 3:12-18; Jer. 16:14-16; Jer. 23:7-8) and implied a western route (see Jer. 18:17; Hosea 12:1). Thus, a natural place to look for what befell those remnants is to study the countries north and west of the Middle East.

It is of interest, therefore, to learn that in Europe, the centuries following 700 B.C. were marked by tremendous outside influence, and language was profoundly affected. During the period between 700 and 400 B.C., numerous languages in Europe underwent major pronunciation changes and absorbed new vocabulary. 2 This was particularly true of the Celtic languages, which were originally spoken throughout Europe (700-300 B.C.) but gradually became more concentrated in western Europe and Britain, and of the Germanic languages, which were spoken in central and northern Europe and Scandinavia and eventually in England. The gradual evolving of the sounds that make up words in a language, particularly

when two languages merge, is known by linguists as a *sound shift.* The well-known pronunciation changes of the period of time between 700 and 400 B.C. have been called the Germanic Sound Shift, because they were the most pronounced and systematic in the Germanic languages, which include English, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic. 3 Also during this same time period, the total vocabulary in the Germanic languages increased by as much as one-third. 4

Linguists have long pondered what caused this sound shift and the increase in vocabulary. 5 One theory is that the technologically advanced peoples who introduced iron to Europe (seventh century B.C. in Austria; sixth century B.C. in Sweden) also influenced the language changes. Linguistic research supports this idea, as well as the idea that these advanced peoples came from the Middle East, where iron was in use. The research shows that the changes in language resulted from an influx of Hebrew-speaking people into Europe, particularly into the Germanic- and Celtic-speaking areas.

The Germanic Sound Shift

Most of the languages of Europe belong to the Indo-European family of languages; that is, they are part of the linguistically linked group of languages spoken in Europe and spreading as far east as Iran and India. For many years, the peculiarities in the Germanic languages kept linguists from recognizing that the Germanic languages belonged to the Indo-European group. However, early in the nineteenth century, two linguists—Rasmus Rask from Denmark (1818) and Jakob Grimm from Germany (1819-22)—showed that the Germanic languages were indeed part of the Indo-European family but that their differences in pronunciation were caused by a systematic shift in the sound of two groups of consonants—[*p, t, k*] and [*b, d, g*]. 6

At the time of the sound shift, the pronunciation of these six consonants was changed to [*ph, th, kh*] and [*bh, dh, gh*], respectively. These new sounds were usually represented in writing by the letters *f, th, h (x* or *ch)* and *b (v), d (th), g (gh).* For example, by applying the rules of the sound shift to the Indo-European *te puk*—replacing the *t, p,* and *k* with *th, f,* and *x*—we recognize the English words *the fox.* Now the relationship between the Indo-European word *pater* and the English word *father* becomes more recognizable.

Linguists generally agree that these changes began taking place sometime after 700 B.C., and that the influence causing the sound shift continued to affect the Germanic dialects for several centuries, at least until 400 B.C. and possibly as late as the Christian Era. 7

Unfortunately, scholars have not been able to agree upon what caused these changes or where the original homeland of the peoples may have been. Scholars have traced them to the Black Sea area, and to the Caucasus Mountains, but research did not trace them beyond there, because the scholars did not know whether that had been the people's first homeland or they had come from the east or south of that point. My research took me to the Middle East, and it was there that I found a likely cause for the sound shift—the Hebrew language.

The first thing I noticed was that Hebrew shifted the same six consonants that were shifted in Germanic—[*p, t, k*] and [*b, d, g*]. In ancient Hebrew, these consonants carried a dual pronunciation. Often, they did not shift, but when they began a syllable that was preceded by a long vowel, or ended a syllable, then [*p, t, k*] and [*b, d, g*] shifted to the sounds [*ph, th, kh*] and [*bh, dh, gh*]. Thus, the Hebrew word for "Spain," *separad,* was pronounced *sepharadh,* and the word for "sign," spelled '*ot,* was pronounced '*oth*.

In 700 B.C., this sound shift was still functional in Hebrew and would have been part of any impact that migrating Israelites would have had on other languages. The fact that the same consonants were involved in similar sound shifts in both Hebrew and Germanic dialects at about the same time is significant. Yet even more significant is that the sounds [*ph, th, kh*] and [*bh, dh, gh*], so prevalent in Hebrew, did not exist in Germanic before the sound shift occurred. 8

A Comparison of Hebrew and Germanic

The case for a Hebrew influence on Germanic is further strengthened by a close comparison of the two languages, and particularly of the changes that developed in Germanic following the Assyrian captivity of Israel. The changes fall generally into three categories: pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.

1. *Pronunciation*. In addition to the similar sound shifts just described, there were other sounds common to both Hebrew and Germanic that did not generally appear in the Indo-European languages. For example, when Hebrew and Germanic consonants appeared between vowels, they normally doubled if the preceding vowel was short. This doubling of consonants, referred to as gemination, became a characteristic feature of Germanic but not of other Indo-European languages. In this way, Indo-European *media* became Old English *middel* and modern English *middle.*

Almost half of the Hebrew verb conjugations required doubling the consonant and substituting a shortened vowel preceding the consonant. Compare Hebrew *shabar* ("to break") and the related Hebrew form *shibber* ("to shatter"). Likewise, almost half of the Germanic verbs doubled the middle consonant and substituted a shortened preceding vowel: Indo-European *sad-* and *bad-* became *settan* ("set") and *biddan* ("bid") in Old English. 9

2. *Grammar.* At the time of the Germanic Sound Shift, the Germanic dialects experienced a sharp reduction in their number of grammatical cases, making Germanic more like Hebrew. As in English, the case (or form) of a noun, pronoun, or adjective in a Germanic language indicated its grammatical relation to other words in a sentence. At the time of the Germanic Sound Shift, the Germanic dialects immediately reduced the number of possible cases for a word from eight to four (as in modern German) and eventually to three (as in English, Spanish, and French). These were the same three cases (with possible remnants of a fourth) that Hebrew used before the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities—*nominative case* (indicating a word is the subject of a sentence), *accusative case* (indicating a word is the object of a verb or preposition), and *genitive case* (used to indicate a word in the possessive form). 10

Indo-European had six verb tenses. Hebrew, on the other hand, contained only two tenses (or aspects), dealing with actions either completed or not completed. Germanic, likewise, reduced its number of tenses to two—past and present. The other tenses in modern Germanic languages have developed out of combinations of these two original tenses.

Verb forms in the two language groups also contain similarities. The Hebrew verb *kom, kam, kum, yikom* ("to arise, come forth"), for example, compares favorably with modern English *come* and *came,* Old English *cuman,* and German *kommen, kam, gekommen* ("to come forth, arrive, arise"). 11

3. *Vocabulary.* Perhaps the most convincing similarity between Hebrew and Germanic lies in their shared vocabularies. Linguists recognize that about one-third of all Germanic vocabulary is not Indo-European in origin. 12 These words can be traced back to the Proto-Germanic period of 700-100 B.C., but not beyond. Significantly, these are the words that compare favorably in both *form* and *meaning* with Hebrew vocabulary. Once a formula was developed for comparing Germanic and Hebrew vocabulary, the number of similar words identifiable in both languages quickly reached into the thousands.

According to this formula, words brought into Germanic after 700 B.C. had a tendency to modify their spelling in three ways:

First, in most Germanic dialects, the words changed in spelling according to the sound shift. Hebrew, on the other hand, changed only in pronunciation; spelling remained the same. For example, Hebrew *parah* ("to bear oneself along swiftly, travel") remained *parah* when written, but was pronounced [*fara*] if it was preceded by a closely associated long vowel. With that in mind, it is easy to recognize the same word in Old Norse and Old Frisian (a dialect in the Netherlands): *fara* ("to travel, move swiftly").

Second, the vowels in the initial syllables were frequently dropped in written Germanic forms because Hebrew words usually carried the accent on the last syllable. Compare Hebrew *daraq* and English *drag.* Occasionally, if the initial consonant was weak, the entire syllable dropped out, as in Hebrew *walad* ("male offspring, son") and English *lad,* and in Hebrew *nafal* ("to fall") and English *fall.*

Third, Hebrew used a tonal accent (a vocal emphasis featuring a tone or sound in part of a word) rather than a stress accent (a vocal emphasis featuring increased volume in speaking part of a word), but this changed to a stress accent in the Germanic dialects. However, the effects of the Hebrew tonal accent are evident in Germanic. The Hebrew tone, which usually appeared in the final syllable, was often represented in written Germanic by one of four tonal letters—*l, m, n,* or *r*. Compare Hebrew *satat* ("to place, found, base, begin") with English *start* (*r* represents the Hebrew tone), and Hebrew *parak* ("to be free, to liberate") with English *frank* ("free; free speech"—in which *p* was shifted to *f,* the unaccented *a*

was deleted, and *n* was added for the Hebrew tone).

Similarities in Hebrew and English words point to their common roots.

Some Hebrew-English Cognates	
Hebrew	English
KAHAL, KAHALAH "to call"	CALL
OBER "to cross over"	OVER
DOR, DUR "to rotate, turn aside, enter a dwelling"	DOOR
GADAR "to surround, enclose, to collect"	GATHER
HARAP, HARAPAH "to pluck [a harp], to harp at, to scold"	HARP
DARAG, DARAGAH "to go by steps, to walk or ascend with difficulty"	DRAG
BALAK, BILEK, BLIYK "to make empty, void" ("void of light") ("void of vegetation, pale") ("void of color") ("void of marks")	BLACK BLEAK BLEACH BLANK
SHAPAH "to form, carve, shape, create"	SHAPE

New Germanic Words from Hebrew Word Roots

Biblical Hebrew contained relatively few root words—originally only a few hundred—but from these roots, words were formed in great variety. Most of these formations were made by exchanging vowels, adding prefixes or suffixes, and doubling consonants according to certain rules. Literally thousands of words similar to these roots, and to the multiple forms that developed out of these roots, appeared in Germanic dialects between 700 and 400 B.C. One example is the Hebrew word *dun* or *don.* The root is *dwn* and is related to the root *'adan* ("to rule, to judge, to descend, to be low, area ruled or judged, area of domain").

The proper name *Dan* ("judge") is related to this root. Out of this root also developed the Hebrew word *'adon* ("Lord, Master"). These words remind us of the Anglo-Saxon word *adun,* out of which the English word *down* (the noun form means "hill, upland") developed and the area ruled was *don,* or its modern counterpart *town.* It is also interesting to note that the Hebrew word *'adon* ("Lord") and its root *'adan* ("to rule, judge") compare well with *Odin* and *Wodan,* two names from different dialects for the highest Germanic god.

The High German Sound Shift

The influence of Hebrew on the Germanic languages does not end with the Germanic Sound Shift of 700-400 B.C. About a thousand years after the first sound shift, the Germanic dialects in northern Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and southern Germany began a second phonetic change involving the same six consonants. Beginning in the south about A.D. 450, this second sound shift, referred to as the High German Sound Shift (since it originated in the highlands of the Alps), spread northward into Switzerland and Austria. By A.D. 750, it had spread to the dialects of southern Germany. This High German dialect continued to grow in popularity (in the sixteenth century Martin Luther used it in his translation of the Bible) until it eventually became the standard form of German.

The major difference between the Germanic Sound Shift of 700-400 B.C. and the High German Sound Shift of A.D. 450-750 [13] was that [*t*], which shifted to [*th*] in the first sound shift, shifted consistently to [*s*] in the second one. This caused the word *water,* for example, to be pronounced *wasser,* and *white* to be pronounced *weiss.* This shift of [*t*] to [*s*] is an important clue to the source of influence for this second sound shift in southern Germanic territory. It leads us, once again, to the Middle East—but this time to the Aramaic language.

The Aramaic Influence

When Persia conquered Babylon, Cyrus the Great freed the captive Jews and allowed them to return to their homeland in Palestine. However, not all wanted to leave the beautiful city of Babylon to return to their country, which had been destroyed. Some stayed. Many from the tribes of both Judah and Benjamin returned. Those who returned to Palestine found themselves surrounded by Aramaic-speaking peoples, and they soon adopted Aramaic as their everyday language. [14]

As a consequence, the Jews were speaking Aramaic in A.D. 70 when the Romans overran Jerusalem and sent thousands of Jews fleeing Palestine. During the following years, many of these Aramaic-speaking Jews made their way northward into Europe. The Christianized Jews, especially, sought the refuge of the Italian Alps, and by A.D. 450, they had established a sizable population there. During the following centuries they gradually spread northward into Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. [15]

Historians have documented these migrations well, but they have failed to recognize the influence of these people's language on the languages they encountered. Aramaic had originally employed a sound shift identical to the Hebrew sound shift, but by 500 B.C. when the Jews learned it, the language had made a small but significant change in its pronunciation. Aramaic began shifting [*t*] to [*s*] rather than to [*th*], as both Hebrew and Aramaic had done previously. [16]

This is also the characteristic difference between the first Germanic Sound Shift of 700-400 B.C. and the High German Sound Shift of A.D. 450-750. [17] For example, in comparing the Hebrew/Aramaic changes with the first and second sound shifts, we note that the Jews at the time of their dispersion pronounced, for example, the Hebrew words *bayit* ("house") as *bayis* and *gerit* (from *gerah* "roughage, grits") as *garis.* By comparison, the German word for *grit* (*griot,* "groats") made a similar change to *grioz,* then to *griess,* during the High German Sound Shift. These changes suggest the influence of Aramaic in the southern Germanic dialects. Additional Hebrew vocabulary was added to the southern German, Austrian, and Swiss dialects during this later period (compare Hebrew *pered,* "beast of burden," with German *Pferd,* "horse").

Two Hebraic Sound Shifts

Thus, what have come to be known as the Germanic Sound Shift and the High German Sound Shift

appear to have been a Hebraic sound shift and a closely related Aramaic sound shift that influenced the Germanic dialects at two separate periods of history. Research also shows that the linguistic mark of the sound shifts, supported by other linguistic similarities, particularly the vocabulary, can be used as a means of tracing Israelite groups throughout the world. So far, the evidence seems to point to Europe as a major destination, particularly to the Germanic- and Celtic-speaking countries of Scandinavia, Britain and the European mainland.

The Gathering of Israel

The role that Abraham's descendants would play in the course of world history was foreshadowed early in the biblical record. To Abraham the Lord said, "I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee." (Gen. 17:6.)

The Lord renewed this promise with Isaac (see Gen. 26:4) and again with Jacob, saying that his descendants would "spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." (Gen. 28:14.)

This spreading would come as Moses foretold: Israel would someday be scattered "among the nations, and … be left few in number among the heathen, whither the Lord shall lead [them]." (Deut. 4:27.) This would be a thorough dispersion. As the Lord said in Amos 9:9, he would "sift the house of Israel among all nations." But he also promised that he would not forget Israel. Eventually, the children of Israel would be gathered "out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south." (Ps. 107:3.)

Although Israel would be scattered throughout the world, the countries north of Israel were particularly singled out as lands from which Israel would be gathered. Jeremiah wrote that "the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be said, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt;

"But, The Lord liveth, that brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north, and from all the lands whither he had driven them." (Jer. 16:14-15; see also D&C 110:11; D&C 133:26.)

It is no wonder that Jesus sent his Apostles out into all the world to preach the gospel (see Mark 16:15) or that he said they should go "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10:6.)

Israel's peoples have been scattered a long time now. As far as we know, only a portion of Judah retained its identity over the centuries. With the restoration of the gospel through the Prophet Joseph Smith, many members who have received their patriarchal blessings have been identified with the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh and a sprinkling of other tribes. It is also significant that among the first to accept the gospel in this dispensation were people who lived—or who had ancestors who had lived—in the very countries that received Israelite migrations.

Seeing Their Footsteps

Changes in language provide only one kind of linguistic evidence we can use to identify the dispersion of Israel. Other linguistic evidence can be found in place names and in the names of various ancient peoples who lived north of the Middle East following the captivity of Israel. Many of these people migrated farther north and west into Russia, Scandinavia, Europe, and Britain.

The apocryphal book of 4 Ezra (a continuation of the book of Ezra in the Old Testament) describes how Shalmaneser, King of Assyria, took northern Israel captive. It also indicates, as Isaiah prophesied (see Isa. 10:27), that at least some of the Israelites escaped their captors and fled north.

According to the account in 4 Ezra (referred to in some editions as 2 Esdras), the fleeing captives "entered into Euphrates by the narrow passages of the river" and traveled a year and a half through a region called "Arsareth." (4 Ezra 13:43-45.) The narrow passage could refer to the Dariel Pass, also called the Caucasian Pass, which begins near the headwaters of the Euphrates River and leads north through the Caucasus Mountains. At the turn of the century, Russian archaeologist Daniel Chwolson noted that a stone mountain ridge running alongside this narrow passage bears the inscription *Wrate*

Israila, which he interpreted to mean "the gates of Israel." 18

These narrow passages lead through a region called *Ararat* in Hebrew, and *Urartu* in Assyrian. Chwolson writes that *Arsareth,* mentioned in 4 Ezra, was another name for Ararat, a region extending to the northern shores of the Black Sea. 19 A river at the northwest corner of the Black Sea was anciently named *Sereth* (now *Siret*), possibly preserving part of the name *Arsareth.* Since *'ar* in Hebrew meant "city," it is probable that Arsareth was a city—the city of Sareth—located near the Sereth River northwest of the Black Sea.

A number of other geographical locations in the area of the Black Sea have names that suggest Hebraic origins. For example, the names of the four major rivers that empty into the Black Sea seem to have linguistic ties to the tribal name of Dan. They are the Don (and its tributary the Don-jets), the Dan-jester (now Dnestr), the Danube (or Donau), and the Dan-jeper (now Dnieper). North of the Caspian Sea is a city called Samara (Samaria). There is also a city of Ismail (Ishmael) on the Danube, and a little farther upstream is a city called Isak (Isaac).

Chwolson and others of the Russian Archaeological Society found more than seven hundred Hebraic inscriptions in the area north of the Black Sea. According to Chwolson, one of these inscriptions refers to the Black Sea as the "Sea of Israel." 20 On the Crimean Peninsula was a place referred to as the "Valley of Jehoshaphat," a Hebrew name, and another place was called "Israel's Fortress." 21 According to the Russian archaeologist Vsevolod Mueller, there was an "Israelitish" synagogue at Kerch (a city on the Crimea) long before the Christian era. 22

It is difficult to date these inscriptions, but some of them contain information relating to the fall and captivity of Israel. Others appear to have been written about the time of Christ and even later, indicating that the area north of the Black Sea contained an Israelite population for many centuries. One of these inscriptions mentions three of the tribes of Israel as well as Tiglath-pileser, the first Assyrian king to transport large segments of the population of Israel to Assyria. 23 Another inscription mentions King Hoshea, who reigned in Israel during the years of Israel's fall. 24

The Russian archaeologists also found mounds, or heaps of earth, dotting the landscape. 25 These mounds, stretching across the entire region north of the Black Sea where the Hebraic inscriptions were found, turned out to be elaborate burial chambers, often containing a leader of the people with some of his possessions. Although mound building was not a typical type of burial in the Middle East, "high heaps" or "great heaps" are described as a means of burial in several Old Testament passages. (See Josh. 7:26, Josh. 8:29; 2 Sam. 18:17.) Furthermore, the people of Ephraim were commanded in the Old Testament specifically to build up "high heaps" as "waymarks" as they traveled. (See Jer. 31:21.)

These Black Sea mounds contain not only inscriptions but also drawings, jewelry, and other artifacts indicative of Hebrew origin. The mounds stretch from the Black Sea northward through Russia to the top of the Scandinavian Peninsula, then southward to southern Sweden—where thousands of mounds are found. 26 Similar burial mounds are also found in Britain and western Europe, indicating other migrations in westerly and northwesterly directions.

Herodotus identified the first of the mound builders in the Black Sea area as *Kimmerioi;* 27 the Romans referred to them as *Cimmerii,* from which we have the name *Cimmerians.* They called themselves *Khumri,* which refers to "the Dynasty of King Omri." Omri was king of northern Israel about 900 B.C. He founded Samaria and established the capital of Israel there. His mode of government made him popular throughout the Middle East, and northern Israel came to be known by his name, politically, from that time on.

There are other peoples throughout Europe and Asia whose origins trace from this area and whose names seem to have a Hebrew root. Among these are the *Galadi* (the root word probably comes from the biblical *Gilead,* the region east of the Jordan River, pronounced *Galaad* in that region and in Assyria and the *Celts* (a Germanic pronunciation of *Galadi*); the *Gallii* (or *Gali,* root word probably from the biblical *Galilee*), also called *Gals, Gaels,* and *Gauls;* the *Sacites,* or *Scythians* (the word comes from Assyrian captives, *Esak-ska* and *Saka,* comparable to the Hebrew *Isaac*); the *Goths,* or *Getai* (the root probably from the biblical *Gad,* pronounced *Gath*); the *Jutes* of Jutland (from the tribe of Judah); and the *Parsi* (from Hebrew *Paras,* which means "the dispersed ones"), who settled Paris and whose name in Germanic

territory sound-shifted to *Frisians.*

Gospel topics: house of Israel, languages

[illustration] Map by Adair B. Payne

[photos] The Assyrian and Babylonian captivities and the Roman conquest of Palestine helped spread the Israelites' influence and language to other areas. (Oval photo by Don L. Searle; other photos by Erich Lessing/Art Resource, N.Y.)

[photo] Photo by J. Scott Knudsen

[photo] Foreground photo by J. Scott Knudsen

[illustration] Portrait of Joseph Smith courtesy of Library-Archives, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Auditorium, Independence, Missouri

[photo] Photo of menorah by Don L. Searle