

Lost Sheep of the House of Israel

I have had a number of interactions with people who identify as adherents of the “Two-House teaching.” They claim that Yeshua (Jesus) only came to save people designated as “the lost sheep of the House of Israel,” meaning the Ten Lost Tribes of the Northern Kingdom. Can you help me with this?

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Yeshua the Messiah and “the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel”

One of the most difficult sayings of Yeshua the Messiah to reckon with, for many people within today’s broad Messianic movement, is where He declares, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (Matthew 15:24, NASU; cf. 10:6). Many of today’s Messianic Jews and Two-House proponents have been found to use “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” as a convenient and significant sound bite, to promote various activities or positions. Many of those involved in Jewish evangelism have used “lost sheep of the house of Israel,” as a way to promote their ministries. Many teachers and leaders within the Two-House sub-movement have been caught using, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” as implying that salvation is only intended for the Jewish people and/or those of the exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, with the nations at large a distant afterthought in the intention of God (that is, if God is even interested in the nations at all). *What do we do with Yeshua’s words about the “lost sheep”?* A much better handle on what “lost sheep of the house of Israel” actually means, in the verses where it appears, is surely needed by **all Messianic people**.

There are some legitimate questions to be asked when one sees Yeshua’s instruction to His Disciples, “Do not go in *the way of the Gentiles*, and do not enter *any city of the Samaritans*; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:5-6, NASU).¹ It should be quite apparent from this, that these directions from the Messiah are bound by some kind of a timestamp or set time period. The idea that Yeshua *completely prohibited* His Disciples from ever going to the nations, or to the Samaritans, runs into a significant continuity problem when we see later instructions from the Lord—to actually go to all the nations and into Samaria (Matthew 28:19; Acts 1:8). The Book of Acts easily attests to how the gospel spread among the Samaritans and the nations at large. The word that the Disciples were to only go “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” had to regard various ministry assignments and tasks which were to take place during Yeshua’s specific, personal time with His Disciples. Once the Messiah ascended into Heaven, any limitation on working with those who were outside of the classification of “lost sheep of the house of Israel” was lifted by His own instruction to them.

For many Two-House advocates, there is some confusion regarding the terms witnessed, because many automatically assume that the Ten Lost Tribes of the Northern Kingdom are referred to when “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”² are spoken of. This is an easy conclusion to pass along, because the Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim is frequently called the House of Israel in the Tanach, and they may be regarded as generally lost

¹ It is interesting to suggest that the Greek term *hodos* (ὁδός), “way” (NASU) or “road” (HCSB), could be viewed in the sense of “a way or manner” (LS, 543), as does Angus Wootten, *Restoring Israel’s Kingdom* (St. Cloud, FL: Key of David, 2000), pp 99-101. So, it might be said that the Disciples were prohibited from acting in the “ways of the nations,” or their behavior. This is a tenuously difficult view to hold here, though, as *hodos* has to be kept in view of *polis* (πόλις), which is a town or a city. A locational orientation for both *hodos* and *polis* is required for Matthew 10:5.

² Grk. *ta probata ta apolōlota oikou Israēl* (τὰ πρόβατα τὰ ἀπολωλότα οἴκου Ἰσραήλ); Delitzch Heb. NT *ha'tzon ha'ovdot asher l'Beit-Yisrael* (הַצֹּן הָאוֹדוֹת אֲשֶׁר לְבֵית־יִשְׂרָאֵל).

among the nations. Yet, when we read the various passages in the Gospels that mention “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30), the idea that this is in reference to the Ten Lost Tribes runs into a few problems.

Most interpreters have rightly associated Yeshua’s references to “lost sheep,” with His Messianic role as the Good Shepherd. D.H. Johnson points out how “The OT language behind the saying about sheep without a shepherd is clear (Num 27:17; 1 Kings 22:17 par. 2 Chron 18:16; Eze 34:5).”³ The tenor of Jeremiah 50:6 is, “My people have become lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray. They have made them turn aside *on* the mountains; they have gone along from mountain to hill and have forgotten their resting place” (NASU). The main issue is Yeshua’s ministry to those of Israel who have gone astray and are perishing in their trespasses and sins, in need of a return to a proper path that pleases the Holy One.

So, who are the specific “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” referred to, and in focus, in the Gospels? Are they the descendants of the exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim? A careful view of Yeshua’s encounter with the Syrophenician, or Canaanite woman, is in order:

“Yeshua got up and went away from there to the region of Tyre. And when He had entered a house, He wanted no one to know *of it*; yet He could not escape notice. But after hearing of Him, a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately came and fell at His feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of the Syrophenician race. And she kept asking Him to cast the demon out of her daughter. And He was saying to her, ‘Let the children be satisfied first, for it is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ But she answered and said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord, *but* even the dogs under the table feed on the children’s crumbs.’ And He said to her, ‘Because of this answer go; the demon has gone out of your daughter.’ And going back to her home, she found the child lying on the bed, the demon having left” (Mark 7:24-30, NASU).

“Yeshua went away from there, and withdrew into the district of Tyre and Sidon. And a Canaanite woman from that region came out and *began* to cry out, saying, ‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is cruelly demon-possessed.’ But He did not answer her a word. And His disciples came and implored Him, saying, ‘Send her away, because she keeps shouting at us.’ But He answered and said, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and *began* to bow down before Him, saying, ‘Lord, help me!’ And He answered and said, ‘It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ But she said, ‘Yes, Lord; but even the dogs feed on the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Yeshua said to her, ‘O woman, your faith is great; it shall be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed at once” (Matthew 15:21-28, NASU).

Any idea that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” means that the good news of salvation is to be constrained only to a particular group of people on Planet Earth—is easily refuted when one witnesses how the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman’s request is answered by Yeshua. *Her daughter is released from the demon, and Yeshua lauds her great faith.* To use Yeshua’s statement, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” to promote some kind of racially-based salvation plan or preference—as it can be seen among a wide number of Two-House people—has no basis from either Mark 7:24-30 or Matthew 15:21-28. If some Messianic Jews claim that “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” means that Yeshua was sent exclusively to see the Jewish people redeemed, this conclusion, as well, has no basis in either Mark 7:24-30 or Matthew 15:21-28—and even more so given Yeshua’s emphasis on the good news to be declared to all nations (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20). The statement, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” is instead to highlight who the first recipients of the gospel were.⁴

So who are, specifically, “the lost sheep of the house of Israel”? Apparently, such persons do not include the Syrophenician or Canaanite woman. Likewise, such “lost sheep of the house of Israel” would have excluded the Samaritans (Matthew 10:5-6). If by “lost sheep of the house of Israel” are intended, as many Two-House proponents think, a reference to the good news going out to the descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes—why would the Samaritans then be excluded? The Samaritans, if “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” spoken of by Yeshua were intended to be the Ten Lost Tribes, should have been some of the **first candidates** to receive the good news, after all. 2 Kings 17:24-41 records how the Assyrians relocated foreigners to what was left of the Northern

³ D.H. Johnson, “Shepherd, Sheep,” in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992), 751.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Matthew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997), 202.

Kingdom of Israel, and they intermarried with many of the remaining Northern Kingdom Israelites, producing the Samaritan people.

Viewing “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” as a reference to the gospel message, only going to those people descended from the exiled Northern Kingdom, runs into some observable challenges. What about the gospel going to those descended from the Southern Kingdom? For that same matter, Yeshua’s prohibition of Matthew 10:5, “Don’t take the road leading to other nations, and don’t enter any Samaritan town” (HCSB), could be taken as meaning that the Disciples were not to go into the Mediterranean basin, where a large number of the Diaspora Jewish population itself resided!

A static reading of passages like Matthew 10:5-6; 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30, with its prohibitions of the Disciples only going “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” is problematic. These instructions had to have been temporal, to the scope of time during the ministry of Yeshua, as they are constrained to a limited geographical area. At a later point in time, the Disciples certainly went to the nations at large, and even to the Samaritans.

So who are “**the lost sheep of the house of Israel**” in Matthew 10:5-6; 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30? These lost sheep are not only Yeshua’s own fellow Jews, but they are specifically the Jewish people who Yeshua reached out to in Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee. The “house of Israel” Yeshua has been sent to, as specified in these verses, excludes not only those people descended from the exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim, but could be taken to exclude those of the Diaspora Jewish community. Yet on the day of *Shavuot*/Pentecost, as witnessed in Acts ch. 2, many scores of Diaspora Jews would come to faith in Him.

Because of how the terminology “lost sheep of the house of Israel” has been used in the vast majority of the Two-House sub-movement, as applied to the exiled Northern Kingdom, it is difficult for some to see the fact that such “lost sheep of the house of Israel” are classified as Yeshua’s own Jewish people. As Bible readers who have to be honest with the text and Biblical history, the Northern Kingdom would quantitatively become “not My people” (Hosea 1:9-10) and be removed from Israel. With the downfall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria, the Southern Kingdom inherited all of the titles and rights and honors of being “Israel” as the legitimate successor state (cf. Ezra 6:17). The Samaritans in Matthew 10:5-6, while perhaps having physical descent from the tribes of the Northern Kingdom, are notably excluded from being classified as the House of Israel.

The House of Israel that Yeshua refers to in Matthew 10:5-6; 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30, is actually intended to be those who recognize the God of Israel as Supreme Deity, the ones who He came to first minister to. This would not be the Samaritans with their hybrid religion, nor would it be the nations at large. For the purposes of these passages, the Jewish people within Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee are the House of Israel. D. Thomas Lancaster’s observations, in his book *The Mystery of the Gospel* (2003), are somewhat useful:

“Who are the lost sheep of Israel that Yeshua sought? They are clearly not Gentiles or even to be found among the Gentiles. They are not the Ten Lost Tribes. They are the sinners and the tax collectors, the backsliders and the irreligious of the Master’s countrymen. They are the Jewish people.”⁵

Of course, no Bible reader can rightly argue that the good news was intended exclusively and only for First Century Jewish people in the Holy Land who had spiritually gone astray. The instructions of Matthew 10:5-6; 15:21-28; Mark 7:24-30 were temporal for the period of Yeshua’s ministry, and draw the attention of how the good news was first declared to those Jews in Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee.

One can see how “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” within the Gospels, does refer to Yeshua’s own Jewish people who are spiritually perishing. But does the subject matter of the exiled Northern Kingdom “out there” among the nations, get totally nullified from the House of Israel being the Jews? It might come as a surprise to some Bible readers, but in the Book of Ezekiel itself—where the two-stick oracle of Ezekiel 37:15-28, detailing a futuristic reunification of Judah and Ephraim, appears—the House of Israel can often be used as terminology to refer to the Southern Kingdom of Judah! Steven Tuell informs us of how,

“Typically in Ezekiel, ‘Israel’ is used for *all* Israel, or even for Judah alone since, with the loss of the northern tribes, Judah is all of Israel that remains...[W]hen Ezekiel is certainly referring to the northern kingdom, he does not usually use the term Israel (see 23:4, where the wicked sister Oholah is Samaria, capital of the northern kingdom, and 37:16, where the northern kingdom is designated Ephraim).”⁶

⁵ D. Thomas Lancaster, *The Mystery of the Gospel: Jew and Gentile in the Eternal Purpose of God* (Littleton, CO: First Fruits of Zion, 2003), 111.

⁶ Steven Tuell, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ezekiel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 26.

The House of Judah actually being referred to as the House of Israel *does not mean* that there are not people from the exiled Northern Kingdom “out there” among the nations; it does mean that by all rights and privileges the Jewish people are the inheritors of the title “Israel.” When Yeshua the Messiah refers to His fellow Jews as “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” it was certainly with this in mind. However, prophecy is clear that there will be a regathering together of a larger and fuller flock of Israel. As it concerns the community of Ancient Israel, of both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms as the flock of the Lord, it is useful for us to take serious note of Jeremiah 50:17:

“Israel is a scattered flock, the lions have driven them away. The first one who devoured him was the king of Assyria, and this last one who has broken his bones is Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon” (NASU).

Israel here is obviously a reference to both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, how they have been scattered,⁷ and how they have been hurt by both the Assyrians and Babylonians. The Northern Kingdom, though, may be regarded as having been devoured or eaten⁸—whereabouts largely unknown. The Southern Kingdom, though, may be regarded as having its bones broken.⁹ The Northern Kingdom was not only scattered, but devoured; the Southern Kingdom was scattered, but only broken. The expectation from God is, “And I will bring Israel back to his pasture and he will graze on Carmel and Bashan, and his desire will be satisfied in the hill country of Ephraim and Gilead. In those days and at that time,” declares the LORD, “search will be made for the iniquity of Israel, but there will be none; and for the sins of Judah, but they will not be found; for I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant” (Jeremiah 50:19-20, NASU). There will be a reunification of the greater flock of Israel, obviously including those from the exiled Northern Kingdom.

Keener astutely indicates, on Matthew 10:1-4, how “Most Jewish people expected an eschatological restoration of the lost tribes (e.g., Tob 13:6; 2 Macc 2:18; Ps. Sol. 8:28; Test. Benj. 9:2; Pesiq. Rab Kah. Sup. 5:3; Gen. Rab. 98:9...), though some dissent seems to have arisen (m. Sanh. 10:5; t. Sanh. 13:12).”¹⁰ We have previously discussed how speculation on what happened to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was present within the Jewish world of Yeshua and the Apostles. An end-time restoration of the descendants of these people is talked about in ancient Jewish literature. Simply because the Jewish people of the First Century were the House of Israel (cf. Acts 2:36)—especially because the widely exiled and scattered Northern Kingdom of Israel was no longer to be regarded as God’s people (Hosea 1:9-10)—does not mean that there were not people from the Northern Kingdom “out there” among the nations. The Samaritans themselves, who were descended from some of the Northern Kingdom survivors, were not even regarded as the House of Israel.

Yeshua’s word of “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” is akin to how Paul would later say, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16, NASU). The Jewish people of the First Century were to surely be recognized as the House of Israel, those who were loyal to the God of Israel, but who were perishing without the Good Shepherd. The Jewish people being such a House of Israel, does not at all, though, rule out various pockets of people in the nations being descended from the exiled Northern Kingdom of Israel/Ephraim.

The condition of anyone from the nations, without knowledge of Israel’s God, is a removal from Israel—meaning that they are not a part of the House of Israel. Paul told those in Asia Minor, after all, “you were at that time separate from Messiah, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12, NASU). Whether a small few non-Jewish Believers among them had a lineage from the exiled Northern Kingdom, or not, **before faith in Yeshua they were not a part of the community of Israel.** They were outside of the realm where the promises and blessings of God—especially the Messianic promise—could be legitimately realized.

Yeshua the Messiah Himself spoke of how, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice; and they will become one flock *with* one shepherd” (John 10:16, NASU). Commentators on the Gospel of John are in general agreement that the “other sheep”¹¹ is an anticipatory remark

⁷ Heb. verb *pazar* (פָּזַר).

⁸ Heb. verb *akal* (אָכַל).

⁹ Heb. verb *atzam* (אָצַם); “gnawed” (RSV).

¹⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 310 fn#2.

¹¹ Grk. *alla probata* (ἀλλὰ πρόβατα).

made by the Lord, about the missions the Apostles would go on among the nations declaring of His salvation.¹² Yeshua the Messiah did envision His followers composing a larger flock of sheep, than just those whom He classified as “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” in Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee. There were also “the children of God who are scattered abroad” (John 11:52, NASU) which were to hear of Him as well. Sheep from the Jewish Diaspora outside of the Land of Israel, and from the nations generally, would need to come to a knowledge of Him as Savior. The “Israel of God” (Galatians 6:16) as rightly manifested via the Messiah’s work, is to be regarded as something rather large and inclusive—composed of all who recognize Him as Redeemer. When Yeshua says, “there will be one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16, CJB), any idea of this being a flock of people with sub-divisions rigidly emphasized, should be disregarded when kept in view of how the unity His followers are to have is like the unity He has with the Father (John 17:21-23).

Today’s Messianic Believers need to be quite cautious when using the terminology “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It was used by Yeshua to describe His fellow Jews in the vicinity of Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee. The good news of His salvation, in fact, was to go out to the Diaspora Jewish community, the Samaritans, *and* the whole world, and as a result would have certainly expanded the spiritual borders of Israel’s commonwealth (cf. Ephesians 2:11-13). It would be advised for today that one *really not use* “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” to describe the current Jewish people who need Yeshua, and especially not those of the exiled Northern Kingdom. For Jewish evangelism, quoting Romans 1:16, “to the Jew first,” is a far better option. And, simply referring to “the exiled/scattered Northern Kingdom” would be what is historically accurate and the least controversial.¹³

¹² Cf. Leon Morris, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 512; F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp 227-228; George R. Beasley-Murray, *Word Biblical Commentary: John*, Vol 36 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 171; D.A. Carson, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 388; Colin G. Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 237.

¹³ For a further evaluation, consult the author’s examination of John 10:14-18, in his publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*