

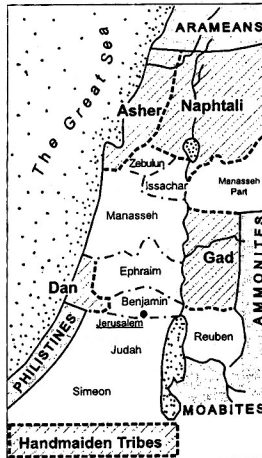
THE UTOPIAN MAP IN EZEKIEL (48:1-35)

HAROLD BRODSKY

After the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE there was little reason to expect that Israel could survive as a people with a distinctive faith. Among the priests and leaders who were exiled from Jerusalem to Babylonia was the prophet Ezekiel. Except in visions, Ezekiel was not able to return to his homeland but he never abandoned hope for Israel's eventual restoration. In his book he described a rebuilt Temple (Ch. 40-48), and a map for the relocation of the Twelve Tribes (48:1-35). While his description of a new Temple is similar to the Temple of Solomon, his tribal map differs considerably from the traditional allocations in the Book of Joshua (Josh. 13-19). The allocations in Joshua realistically conform to the topography of the land. However, Ezekiel's map seemingly disregards both the landscape and (to some extent) previous tribal locations. Consequently, biblical scholars have generally in-

Tribal Arrangement

Joshua (13-19)



Ezekiel (48:2-27)

Dan	Rachael (Bilhah)
Asher	Leah (Zilpah)
Naphtali	Rachael (Bilhah)
Manasseh	Rachael
Ephraim	Rachael
Reuben	Leah
Judah	Leah
City	Princes
Benjamin	Rachael
Simeon	Leah
Issachar	Leah
Zebulun	Leah
Gad	Leah (Zilpah)

Tribal ancestry: Asher – Leah/Zilpah; Naphtali – Rachel/Bilhah; Zebulun & Issachar – Leah; Gad – Leah/Zilpah; Manasseh & Ephraim (sometimes Joseph alone) – Rachel; Benjamin – Rachel; Dan – Rachel/Bilhah; Judah – Leah; Reuben – Leah; Simeon – Leah. (Levi – under Joshua, distributed in various cities; Ezekiel locates this tribe between the Temple and the city)

Harold Brodsky is an Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Maryland.

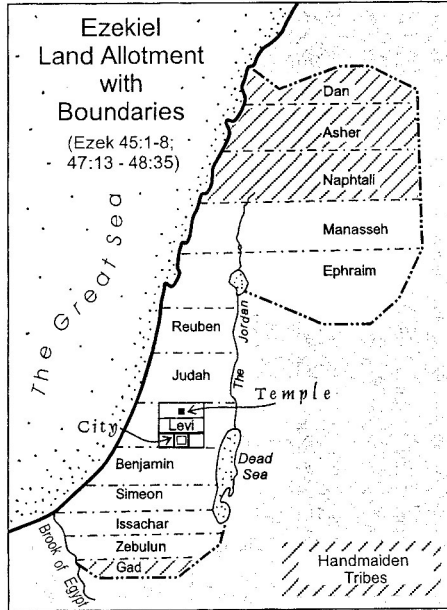
terpreted Ezekiel's map as symbolic. But what was the message embedded in his map?

Clearly, the political and social basis for the old tribal order was flawed. The Book of Judges mentions numerous incidents of tribal disunity. After King Solomon died circa 926 BCE, the tribes broke apart into two relatively weak nations that could not withstand eventual destruction by foreign armies. It was Ezekiel's task to propose a new order in the land that would prevent tribal rivalries. His vision, radical for his time, was for a union of tribes *each like his brother* (47:14). This ideal of fraternal equality is symbolized on his map by equal portions of land for each tribe.

However, territorial equality is not always apparent when his prophecy is shown on modern biblical maps. One commentator went so far as to say that Ezekiel had failed to describe a utopia because it is not true that "all tribes have identical sociopolitical status."¹ When boundaries are shown on Ezekiel's map, the tribes will of necessity vary in size (Ezek. 47:15-20, 48:1, 28). Further, the tribes lack "equal access to the Temple," because the "handmaiden" tribes are further from the Temple than other tribes. Thus, Ezekiel's vision of tribal equality may be contradicted by his own plan: some tribes can be shown to have more territory than others, and some tribes apparently have a privileged location.

TRIBAL EQUALITY

Ezekiel describes boundaries for Israel with actual places and well-known physical features: . . . *from the Great Sea by way of Hethlon, Lebo-hamath, Zedad, Berathah, Sibraim . . .* (47:15-16) and so on. However, these boundaries do not match closely any known political or settlement area. Rather, they were probably inserted to satisfy a religious concern. Lands outside a ritually defined Israel are considered unclean (cf. Josh. 22:19; Amos 7:17; Hos. 9:3; Ezek. 4:13). Thus on issues related to purity "a clearly observable distinction between clean and unclean land" is required.² In addition, this boundary description "is patterned after a royal grant."³ It probably suggested to the exiles of Israel a supremely royal or Divine grant of territories to Israel from which future offerings will be acceptable at a restored Temple.



The description of the boundaries is geographic and largely identifiable as places and physical features. The description of tribal allocations, however, is entirely symbolic. The tribal territories seem to hover over the land, since no landmark anchors them in place. Not even Jerusalem is mentioned (though it is inferred). Consequently, the tribal allocation should not be mapped together with the boundaries. Precedence for this interpretation is found within a commentary on Ezekiel's vision attributed to Rashi. This commentary contains a map that omits boundaries and shows the tribal territories as equal strips.⁴

THE LOCATION OF THE "HANDMAIDEN TRIBES"

Ezekiel, like Joshua, located "handmaiden" tribes in peripheral frontier areas.⁵ But such locations could not have implied spiritual inferiority in the Book of Joshua since, at that time, there was no Temple. Nor should frontier tribes necessarily be regarded as inferior in the Book of Ezekiel. In biblical times, a handmaid (variously translated as maid, concubine, servant girl, slave girl) evidently had a lesser marital status than a wife. Therefore, some commentators also infer a lower status for tribes descended from a handmaid.

According to Malamat, however, the term "handmaiden tribe" may have been a way of referring to tribes that had migrated to peripheral areas.⁶ Possibly, distance from the mainstream made frontier tribes appear different, perhaps even "eccentric" but not necessarily inferior.

More in line with Ezekiel's utopian vision is a midrash, dating back to the first millennium, that addresses the question of handmaiden-tribal inferiority:

It is thus that R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: Why are not the names of the tribes in the same order in all places, but sometimes one takes the precedence and sometimes another?

So that you should not think that the children of the wives come first, and those of the handmaidens last, but to teach you that these were not greater than the others (Midrash Rabbah, Exodus 1:6).

Bennett tabulated 20 listings of the tribes in the Bible; remarkably, each one shows some variation in tribal order.⁷

A SYMBOLIC MEANING FOR THE ORDER OF THE TRIBES

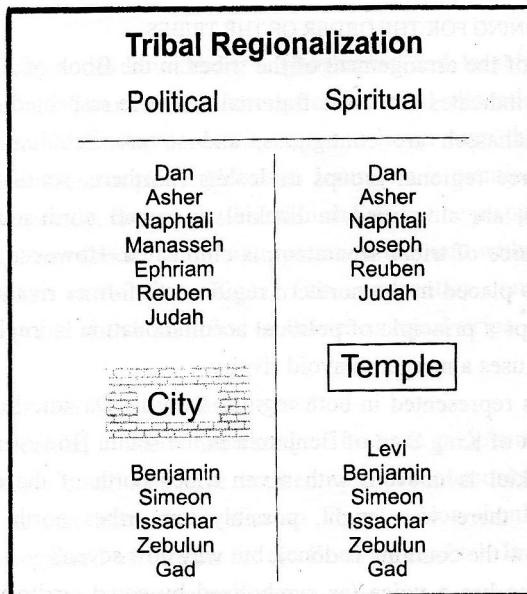
A comparison of the arrangement of the tribes in the Book of Joshua with the Book of Ezekiel indicates that close fraternal ties were respected on both maps. Ephraim and Manasseh are contiguous, and so are Zebulun and Issachar. However, the three regional groups in Joshua (northern, southern, and trans-Jordanian tribes), are simplified in Ezekiel to a dual north-south alignment. Thereby, one source of tribal separatism is eliminated. However, in contrast to the past, Judah is placed in the northern region with former rivals Ephraim and Manasseh. Perhaps a principle of political accommodation is implied in a tribal arrangement that uses a merger to avoid rivalry.

Royal lineage is represented in both regions with the Davidic line of Judah in the north and that of King Saul of Benjamin in the south. However, the regional grouping in Ezekiel is uneven, with seven tribes north of the city, and five below. Formerly there were eight, possibly ten, tribes north of Jerusalem (depending on how the counting is done), but why now seven?

While each tribe has a voice (as symbolized by equal territorial strips), the reality of a stable political system requires a coalition into regional groups, and leadership by the larger group. True, this model has entrenched coalitions, but sons of the matriarchs Leah and Rachel are represented in both

factions. Judah, a Leah tribe, is placed in the northern faction, but within this region the Rachel tribes outnumber the Leah tribes (four to three). Benjamin, a Rachel tribe, joins the southern tribes but is outnumbered by the Leah tribes (four to one). Ezekiel in this new allocation carefully mingled the tribes to provide political and social checks and balances. This integrated distribution reduces the possibility of factional disputes based solely on tribal descent.

However, while political stability is more likely under the rule of the larger group, moral and spiritual decisions should be a matter of law and tradition, not numbers. To achieve this ideal, the tribes on Ezekiel's map are evenly distributed about the Temple, six to the north, and six to the south. This accounting is possible because Levi, in certain circumstances, can be considered a separate tribe. When this occurs, however, Ephraim and Manasseh are combined as the single tribe of Joseph, which Ezekiel does in naming the gates of the city (Ezek. 48:30-34). Under such a system of numbering there are always exactly twelve tribes.



The 19th-century biblical exegete R. Meir Leibush (Malbim) explained that in Ezekiel's plan Manasseh and Ephraim were allowed to retain separate territories politically, but for ritual purposes Levi had to be given "a share in

the offering of the sanctuary . . ." ⁸ Consequently, with respect to the Temple, six tribes are numbered from the north (Manasseh and Ephraim are counted as one), and six from the south (by including Levi). This equality complies with the scriptural warning not to follow a majority in all matters: *Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil . . .* (Ex. 23:2). Since the priests serve as judges in lawsuits (Ezek. 44:24), they must regard the tribes as equals. Symbolically the map indicates equal justice before the law with an even balance of tribes about the Temple.

CONCLUSIONS

The boundaries described in Ezekiel probably served to delineate land that could be used for ritual purposes. As such, they seem to have had no direct political implications. In any event, the boundary description differs both in style and purpose from the description of the tribal territories and can be mapped separately.

Ezekiel places the "handmaiden tribes" toward the frontier, seemingly at a disadvantaged distance from the restored Temple. But the Book of Joshua also places these tribes at the frontier at a time before the Temple was built and when distance from the Temple could not have indicated inferiority. In biblical times, the term "handmaiden," may simply have implied a frontier location.

Administratively, the seven-to-five tribal distribution about the city symbolizes political stability, with control by the larger regional coalition. From the viewpoint of the priests, however, the six-to-six tribal distribution about the Temple symbolizes equality in moral and ritual issues. Thus, over 2,500 years ago the prophet Ezekiel described a map that conveyed, in symbolic form, a vision that is consistent with the ideals of a modern democratic society.

NOTES

1. D. I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1998) p. 723.
2. K.D. Hutchens, "Defining The Boundaries: A Cultic Interpretation of Numbers 34.1-12 and Ezekiel 47.13-48.1,28," in *History and Interpretation: Essays in honor of John H. Hayes*, ed. M.P. Graham, W.P. Brown, and J.K. Kuan, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 173, (Sheffield England, JSOT Press, 1993) pp. 215-230.
3. D.H. Engelhard, "Ezekiel 47:13-48:29 as Royal Grant," in "Go to the Land I will show you." Vol. 34, No. 1, 2006

Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young, ed. J.E. Coleson and V. H. Matthews (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996).

4. G.C. Grossman, *Jewish Art* (Westport, CT: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, Inc, 1995) p.51.
5. The Book of Joshua (13:15-23) locates Reuben on the frontier along the east bank of the Jordan River. Yet, Reuben was not called a handmaiden tribe, perhaps because in earlier times it may, in part, have been more centrally located. Boling and Wright explain that the tribe of Reuben "once ranged widely . . . on both sides of the river," and, according to Kallai, "Reuben's allotment is secondary, a result of the infiltration of Reuben's clans from west of the Jordan." R. G. Boling and G. E. Wright, *Joshua* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982) p. 341; Z. Kallai, *Historical Geography of the Bible: The Tribal Territories of Israel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986) p. 244.
6. A. Malamat, "Tribal Societies: Biblical Geneologies and African Lineage Systems," in *History of Biblical Israel: major problems and minor issues* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) pp. 41-53.
7. W. H. Bennett, "Tribe," in *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. J. Hastings (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. 1988) p. 811.
8. A. J. Rosenberg, *Ezekiel*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper and Row, 1991) p. 425.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2006

January	Proverbs	4 - 31
February	Job	1 - 25
March	Job	26 - 42
	Song of Songs	1 - 8
April	Ruth	1 - 4
	Lamentations	1 - 5
	Ecclesiastes	1 - 12
	Esther	1 - 4
May	Esther	5 - 9
	Daniel	1 - 11
	Ezra	1 - 10