

Among those who teach that America and Britain are the recipients of the birthright promises passed on to Joseph, the “traditional view” is that the British Empire represented the fullness of the promise that Ephraim would become a “company of nations.” (Since the Empire no longer exists, many now feel that the United Kingdom is Ephraim.) Likewise, America is seen as the fulfillment of the promise that Manasseh would become a single “great nation.” There are, however, a number of convincing arguments that have been put forth suggesting that America is Ephraim and that Britain is Manasseh. This approach—which initially gained a considerable measure of support in the early 1900s—deserves a fair hearing, as several of its points are quite plausible.

Writers sometimes choose to ignore alternate or opposing views on a subject. But to do so knowingly is not only a disservice to the reader, it also compromises the writer’s credibility. Thus, in the interest of thoroughness, credibility, and fairness, this appendix will present the more compelling of these “alternate view” arguments.

Remember that historical facts are just that, facts. But it is how we interpret those facts that often leads us to differing conclusions. As the reader will see, this issue ultimately comes down to how one chooses to interpret the facts concerning America and Britain.

A Key Argument

We read in Genesis 48 that Ephraim was to become a “multitude” of nations—and was to be greater than Manasseh (verse 19). Back in Genesis 35, we read: “And God said to [Jacob], ‘I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall be from you, and kings shall come out of your loins’ ” (verse 11). The word company literally means an organized group or assembly—even a commonwealth. Moreover, Deuteronomy 33:17 indicates that Ephraim would comprise a far greater population than Manasseh. In most translations the verse reads, “they are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and they are the thousands of Manasseh.” The Hebrew for “ten thousands” actually means myriads—simply indicating a great number (see Young’s, NRSV, etc.). Thus, while a ten-to-one ratio is not at all implied, a significant disparity does exist between thousands and myriads. Clearly, the meaning is that Ephraim would have a much greater population than Manasseh.¹

A key “alternate view” argument centers on the fact that Jacob’s offspring was to grow into a “company of nations”—hence the wording, “shall be from you.” In Genesis 48:19, it expressly says that Ephraim’s seed would become a multitude of nations. Yet only a small percentage of the British Empire’s population was actually of British origin—was of Jacob, or of Ephraim. At its height around 1922, the Empire ruled over some 460 million subjects. But only Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa were appreciably populated with Anglo-Saxon and Celtic peoples; the overwhelming majority—the millions of India, Burma, the vast swaths of Africa, etc.—were clearly non-Israelite. Thus, the majority of Ephraim’s supposed “company of nations” were not of Ephraim—not of Jacob.

Ultimately, Britain’s expansion across the world was in power, not in “seed.” While Britain ruled numerous territories, she did not replace the indigenous peoples of those areas with peoples of Israelite descent. But when it comes to fulfilling the promises made to Jacob, it is irrelevant that Britain ruled over millions of subjects; what matters—based on Genesis 35:11 and 48:19—is how many were of Jacob. For the Empire to qualify as modern Ephraim, it would have needed a much greater population than America—counting only those of Israelite origin. Even today, the combined populations of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand scarcely exceed 100 million (and this includes non-Israelite immigrants). Thus, the population of America—now at just over 317 million—far exceeds that of the Israelite portion of the British Empire or the current Commonwealth (and greatly exceeds the mere 60 million of the UK). So which actually had the myriads of peoples—Britain or America?

A counter-argument to this line of reasoning is that America itself is made up of a great number of non-Israelite immigrants. While this is true, the difference lies in the fact that, in the past, immigrants to America came to this land to become Americans—to be “grafted in.” By contrast, the millions of the British Empire were never more than subjects of imperial expansion.

The United States—a “Company of Nations”?

If we only count the nations of the British Empire whose populations were truly of Israelite origin, we have a rather small “company” indeed. By comparison, the United States is a “company” of 50 nation-states—with a comparative myriad of peoples (317 million). Even the name supports this conclusion: United suggests a union or company, and State is just another word for nation (hence, we speak of “heads of state”).²

From the inception of the United States as a republic, its states were looked upon as possessing a high degree of independence. Only in modern times—essentially as a consequence of the Civil War—has the U.S. been thought of as a single nation. In fact, the idea of the states uniting in order to form a nation was contrary to the founders’ purposes. Their intent, as revealed in numerous founding documents, was to form a union of states that shared a common central government—one designed to serve the collective interests of the states as allowed by the U.S. Constitution. Notice this remarkable statement from the Encyclopedia Britannica: “The United States consists of 48 separate and theoretically sovereign states which are joined together by a federal government to which the original 13 states delegated certain powers as outlined in the federal constitution adopted in 1787.”³ This “federal government” was never meant (as is often the case today) to supersede the authority of the state. Throughout the Constitution, the phrase “United States”—repeatedly used in contrast to “the several States”—refers overwhelmingly to the federal government, not to a single nation. Moreover, the Constitution never speaks of “citizens” of the United States—until it comes to the 14th Amendment. Before this amendment was created and adopted, Americans were considered to be citizens of their own respective states.

This separation of the states from the central government can also be seen in various high court rulings. For example, in *Bevans vs. the United States* (1818), the court wrote: “In the United States of America, there are two (2) separated and distinct jurisdictions, such being the jurisdiction of the states within their own state boundaries, and the other being the federal jurisdiction (United States), which is limited to the District of Columbia, the U.S. Territories, and federal enclaves within the states, under Article I, Section 8, Clause 17 [of the Constitution].” This ruling reflects the pre-Civil War mindset that the states were fundamentally independent of the “federal government.”

Those who favor the “traditional view” cite the proclamation made in America’s “Pledge of Allegiance”—that the U.S. is “one nation, under God, indivisible.” But does this prove that America cannot be Ephraim? The U.S. motto is *e pluribus unum*—“out of many, one.” But is this one nation, or one union? Ultimately, the foundation of the United States rests on the Constitution, not on later pledges and mottos. Still, it is rightly argued that a number of modern nations (Russia, Germany, etc.) are actually composed of states or provinces—yet they are each considered to be one nation.

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By contrast, the original American colonies (each one sovereign in its own right) contracted together as equals to form a union with a federal government—an example of a true commonwealth. This begs the question: Was the British Empire—which was only scarcely populated by Israelites—really the biblical “company of nations” representing Ephraim? Or, does not the United States of America better fit that prophetic description?

Ephraim “set before” Manasseh

Genesis 48:20 observes that Jacob “set Ephraim before Manasseh.” According to the “traditional view,” this means that Ephraim was not only favored in terms of greatness, but that his blessings were to be realized first. In other words, Ephraim would rise to prominence first, with Manasseh’s blessings following later. And this certainly appears to have been the case: The British Empire rose to worldwide prominence first, with America ascending to greatness only after the Empire had fallen into decline.

However, those who favor the “alternate view” rightly note that the Hebrew of this passage says nothing about time sequence; the clear meaning is that Ephraim—not being the firstborn—was uncharacteristically favored with a much greater blessing.⁴ Even so, the biblical tradition of honoring the firstborn first would have been upheld (Deuteronomy 21:15-17 supports the principle that the rights of the firstborn were never to be violated). Thus, as the firstborn, Manasseh would have received his “lesser” blessing first.

In fact, the actual wording of Genesis 48:19 suggests that Joseph’s sons would become a “great nation” and a “company of nations”—in that order. Manasseh, as one would expect, is mentioned first, then Ephraim. As per the “alternate view,” this is exactly what history records: As Manasseh, Britain came to greatness first, followed later by Ephraim-America, who was to surpass his older brother in greatness, wealth, and military might.

Separated by Time—or Contemporaneous?

According to the “traditional view,” America began to rise rapidly to prominence only after the British Empire had fallen into serious decline. In essence, the latter succeeded the former. This, of course, means that modern Ephraim and Manasseh did not actually share the world stage together—but were significantly separated by time. It is argued, however, that Genesis 48 suggests that Ephraim and Manasseh should be viewed contemporaneously. In other words, both the “great nation” and the “company of nations” were to appear on the world stage within the same time frame.

But what “time frame” would that be?

Immediately following Jacob’s blessing of Joseph’s two sons is the patriarch’s prophecy for Israel in the “latter days” (Gen. 49:1). This suggests that we are to view the promises concerning Ephraim and Manasseh in an end-time context. The British Empire reached its zenith in the early 1900s—after its “imperial century” of growth. Following World War II, the Empire began to rapidly unravel; meanwhile, circumstances dictated that America rise to fill the void left by Britain. But the 1800s were hardly the “latter days.” Thus, it would appear that the British Empire was virtually gone by the time the “latter days” arrived.⁵

Are we to assume that only America, as Manasseh, was to be great during the latter days? Was not Ephraim to be a great “company” of nations in the latter days as well? But how could the British Empire qualify—its glory days were the 18th and 19th centuries? Are we to believe that the great “company of nations” has been reduced, in the latter days, to the British Commonwealth or the UK? As a union of nations, Ephraim was to be a world superpower in the latter days. Neither the Commonwealth nor the UK fit this description.

What “company” or “union” of nation-states has truly been a great superpower in the latter days? And what “great nation”—just like an “older brother” would—has always been by its side?

If we consider the “alternate view,” we have throughout the closing decades of the 20th century a “great nation” (Great Britain—without its empire, but still a global leader) and a “union of nations” (the United States) side by side—both dominating the world at the same time, in what many consider to be the “latter days.” This approach seems to best fit the context of Genesis 48-49.

The Greatness of Ephraim

The very name Ephraim means “doubly fruitful.” Traditionally, the prosperity of the British Empire is seen as the fulfillment of this aspect of Ephraim’s blessing. Indeed, at its height it was the most expansive empire in the history of the world, holding sway over some 460 million people—a fifth of the world’s population at the time—and covering almost a quarter of the earth’s total land area. Moreover, following the defeat of Napoleonic France in 1815, Britain enjoyed a century of almost unchallenged global dominance through its invincible Royal Navy.

As a result of her worldwide colonization accomplishments, British political, legal, linguistic, and cultural influences are widespread. Practically every corner of the earth has been affected by the British Empire—and almost always for the better.

However, proponents of the “alternate view” contend that national greatness is not determined by such factors as total land mass or numbers of subjects ruled (we have already noted that the British Empire was composed predominately of non-Israelites). Instead, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is touted as a better indicator of overall wealth. Comparing the past GDP of the British Empire to the current U.S. GDP is no easy task, but we can look at the GDP of Britain as an indication. In theory, Britain’s past economic output should reflect the prosperity of the Empire. In 1870, the U.S. and Britain both shared about the same percentage of world GDP. But by 1900, the economic height of the British Empire, the British percentage of world GDP had barely changed while America’s percentage had doubled. From that point Britain’s GDP began to decline as American GDP steadily grew.⁶

This indicates that the U.S. economy has ultimately outpaced that of even the British Empire. Today, America’s GDP (\$17 trillion) is almost double that of the present British Commonwealth (\$9 trillion). In fact, with only 4.5 percent of the world’s population, the U.S. still controls over 30 percent of the world’s wealth. This suggests that America has been “doubly fruitful”—not Britain.

What’s more, America—often referred to as the “breadbasket of the world”—has fed more people around the world than any nation in history. In addition, American technological advancements have benefited every nation on earth. Militarily, the British Royal Navy clearly ruled the seas in its day. But it was American military might that saved the free world in two world wars. Today, the U.S. military remains unmatched in history.

Clearly, Ephraim was to be greater than Manasseh (Gen. 48:19). But as one would expect, judging “greatness” is largely subjective, and there are good arguments for both sides in this case.

America and the Number 13

One final “alternative” argument needs to be noted. The number 13 is strongly associated with America: the 13 original colonies; the 13 stripes in the U.S. flag; the Great Seal consisting of several elements featuring the number 13—stars, leaves on the olive branch, arrows, stripes on the shield, etc. There are other examples as well.

Proponents of the “traditional view” associate the number 13 with the half-tribe of Manasseh, which is said to be the “13th tribe.” (Because Joseph’s two sons took his place among the tribes, this made them numbers 12 and 13; Benjamin, originally the 12th tribe, moved to number 11.) Based on Genesis 48:20—where Jacob “set Ephraim before Manasseh”—it is assumed that Ephraim would be number 12, and Manasseh 13.

Thus, Manasseh is linked to America.

But among those who favor the “alternate view,” this order is said to be inconsistent: The birth order of the tribes is used except in the case of Joseph’s sons, where they are ordered by inheritance. But if we consistently use the tribes’ birth order, Ephraim rightfully becomes the 13th tribe. Thus, could Ephraim be linked to America instead?

Conclusion

As the reader can see, the “alternate view” presents some compelling arguments. For the most part, however, they require that one almost wholly dismiss the importance of the British Empire. As Chapter 13 brings out, the British Empire was the greatest empire in history—and its influence around the world has been profound, to say the least. That fact alone practically demands its consideration as modern Ephraim.

Ultimately, the conclusion one draws on this matter is dependent on how he or she interprets the information available. In the end, the thesis of this book remains unchanged: Britain and America are, without question, the modern-day nations of biblical Joseph.

APPENDIX 10 NOTES

1. Deuteronomy 33:17 appears to be referring primarily to military power. Thus, the relative populations mentioned here may be the sizes of armies. No nation has ever amassed a bigger military force than America during World War II. Moreover, the size of a nation's military is usually a reflection of overall population.

2. Just as "United States" implies a "company of nations," it is often noted that Great Britain is appropriately named—Great—as Manasseh was to become a "great" nation (Gen. 48:19).

3. Encyclopedia Britannica (1947 edition); article, "United States of America"

4. According to some, one aspect of Ephraim's "greater blessing" is that his descendants would become the recipients of the Davidic "throne" when it went into forced exile (see Chapters 11 and 12). That the "throne" should be safeguarded in Ephraim, as opposed to Manasseh, is based on the fact that Ephraim was anciently the leading tribe of the House of Israel. Thus, if it belonged anywhere, outside of the land of Judah, it belonged in Ephraim. Throughout the Bible, special honor is shown to the firstborn. In this case, of course, Manasseh was the firstborn. However, God calls Ephraim His "firstborn" in Jeremiah 31:9. In providing the Davidic "throne" sanctuary in the British Isles, it is suggested that God was indeed honoring Ephraim. If so, this argues in favor of the "traditional view" that Britain is modern Ephraim.

5. This assumes the "last days" began shortly after World War II. It must be noted that determining when the world entered into the "latter days" or the "end time" is a matter of conjecture. Biblically, the "latter days" appear to be associated with specific events that bring about the close of this present age. Thus, it would be difficult to justify including the 1800s as part of the "last days." Some, however, insist that the "latter days" began as early as the 16th century.

6. "History of World GDP," www.ritholtz.com/blog/2010/08/historyofworldgdp/; based on data from www.economist.com/node/16834943.