

Daniel H. Ludlow, “Of the House of Israel,” *Ensign*, Jan 1991, 51

Are most members of the Church literal descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or are they Gentiles who have been adopted into the house of Israel?

The question is raised hundreds of times each year throughout the Church: Are Church members literal descendants of Israel, as most patriarchal blessings state? Or are we Gentiles and belong to the house of Israel only by adoption?

The answer is important, for the literal seed of Abraham are the natural heirs to the remarkable promises given anciently to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Most members of the Church understand the principles of heirship and adoption, but they often misunderstand the meaning of some key terms in the scriptures. Terms like *literal descendants of Abraham by birth*, *tribe of Israel*, *house of Israel*, *lineage*, and *Gentiles* are sometimes confused, and some terms have a range of meanings, referring to different ideas in different contexts.

Let’s review these terms, then, and examine what the prophets, both ancient and modern, have said about the topic.

## **Who Is a Literal Descendant of Abraham by Birth?**

In the scriptures, a literal descendant of Abraham is often referred to by the word *Hebrew*, a word derived from the same root as *Eber*. (See [Gen. 10:21](#).) The first time the word is used in the Bible (in [Gen. 14:13](#)) it refers to Abraham himself. In Genesis 39:14 [[Gen. 39:14](#)] it refers to Joseph, a great-grandson of Abraham. Rather consistently throughout the remainder of the scriptures, *Hebrews* is used to refer to those who are direct, literal descendants of Abraham.

The descendants of Abraham (Hebrews) include anyone whose lineage goes back to any of the sons born to Abraham and his three wives. These wives and their sons, listed in the order of the wives’ marriages to Abraham, are as follows: from Sarah—Isaac; from Hagar—Ishmael; from Keturah—Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah.

Please note that the descendants of Abraham include many, many more peoples than those who are descended from Isaac, the son who is discussed most in the Bible. Entire nations are directly descended from Abraham, including citizens of the numerous Arab countries and those from multitudinous groups who have intermarried into other cultures and races.

## **Who Belongs to a “Tribe of Israel” or to the “House of Israel”?**

Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, had a son called Jacob, whose name was subsequently changed to Israel. Jacob had four wives, by whom he had twelve sons: from Leah—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun; from Rachel—Joseph and Benjamin; from Bilhah—Dan and Naphtali; from Zilpah—Gad and Asher. The descendants of these twelve sons have

been divided into separate family tribes, each carrying the name of the son of Israel through whom they were born: Reuben, Simeon, etc. Collectively, the descendants of the tribes of Israel are known as the house of Israel and are called Israelites. Obviously, all Israelites (descendants of Jacob) are Hebrews (descendants of Abraham), but not all Hebrews are Israelites.

Additional family names are used for some groups in the house of Israel. The descendants of Judah (the fourth-born son of Jacob), for example, are known as Jews, and the descendants of Ephraim (a son of Joseph) are called Ephraimites. (See [Judg. 12:4–6.](#))

In summary, then, the literal descendants of Abraham (Hebrews) include the descendants of Jacob (Israelites), Judah (Jews), and Ephraim (Ephraimites), all of whom are mentioned extensively in the scriptures. However, the descendants of Abraham also include many additional peoples who would be included in the Lord’s promise to Abraham: “I will multiply thee, and thy seed after thee, like unto these [stars]; and if thou canst count the number of sands, so shall be the number of thy seeds.” ([Abr. 3:14.](#))

## Who Is a “Gentile”?

The basic meaning of the word *Gentile* is “foreign,” “other,” or “non.” Thus, to a Hebrew, a Gentile is a non-Hebrew; to an Israelite, a Gentile is a non-Israelite; and to a Jew, a Gentile is a non-Jew. In this sense, some Latter-day Saints have referred to those who are not members of the Church as Gentiles, even though the nonmembers might be Jews!

The word *Gentile* might also be used in several different ways to refer to family, religious, political, or even geographical relationships. For example, a person might be considered an Israelite in a family or blood sense, but might be called a Gentile in a political or geographical sense because he lives in a land or nation that is primarily Gentile, or non-Israelitish.

## What Does the Term *Lineage* Mean As It Pertains to Patriarchal Blessings?

The basic meaning of *lineage* is “descent in a line from a common progenitor.” Thus, in a patriarchal blessing, lineage is being declared (from Abraham, or Israel, or Ephraim, etc.) when terms indicating direct descent are used, such as “son of,” “daughter of,” “seed of,” “blood of,” “descendant of,” or “from the loins of.”

Concerning the responsibility of the patriarch to declare such lineage, the First Presidency of Heber J. Grant, J. Reuben Clark, Jr., and David O. McKay announced: “Patriarchal blessings contemplate inspired declaration of the lineage of the recipient.” (*Messages of the First Presidency*, 6 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975, 6:194.)

Patriarchs have also been counseled: “A vital part of every patriarchal blessing is the declaration of lineage. ... The patriarch should be responsive to the whisperings of the Spirit as he identifies lineage and the special promises and blessings attendant thereto. ... The declaration of lineage is to come by the promptings of the Holy Ghost. This inspiration can come to the patriarch

regardless of the race or nationality of the person receiving the blessing.” (*Information and Suggestions for Patriarchs*, p. 4; quoted by permission.)

In view of the foregoing statements, we can see that the lineages declared in patriarchal blessings are almost always statements of actual blood lines; they are not simply tribal identifications by assignment.

In light of these definitions and explanations, let’s examine some statements from the scriptures and from prophets of this dispensation that relate to the question of adoption and lineage, which in turn relates to the gathering of Israel in the latter days.

## References from the Scriptures

Many scriptures address the question of lineage directly (which is indicative of its importance), but only a relatively few selected ones can be listed here; pay particular attention to those marked with an asterisk:

*Genesis*: [Gen. 12:1–3\\*](#); [Gen. 13:14–17](#); [Gen. 15:1–6](#); [Gen. 17:1–8](#); [Gen. 21:12–13](#); [Gen. 22:15–18](#); [Gen. 25:1–2](#); [Gen. 26:1–5\\*](#); [Gen. 28:1–4](#); [Gen. 32:27–28](#); [Gen. 35:9–12\\*](#); [Gen. 48:1–20](#) (JST, Gen. 48:5–11); [Gen. 49:1–28](#) (JST, Gen. 50:24–38).

*Deuteronomy*: [Deut. 32:8\\*](#); [Deut. 33:13–17](#).

*Isaiah*: [Isa. 5:26–30](#); [Isa. 11:10–16\\*](#); [Isa. 14:1–3](#); [Isa. 27:6](#); [Isa. 12–13](#); [Isa. 49:8–16](#); [Isa. 52:1–12](#); [Isa. 60:1–22](#); [Isa. 61:1–11](#); [Isa. 66:5–13](#).

*Jeremiah*: [Jer. 3:14–18](#); [Jer. 16:14–21](#); [Jer. 23:5–8\\*](#); [Jer. 31](#):chapter heading of LDS edition.

*Daniel*: [Dan. 2:44–45](#).

*Amos*: [Amos 9:8–9\\*](#).

*Micah*: [Micah 5:7–8\\*](#).

*Zechariah*: [Zech. 8:1–23](#); [Zech. 10:1–12\\*](#).

*Romans*: [Rom. 11:13–36](#).

*Galatians*: [Gal. 3:6–29](#) ([Gal. 3:8–9\\*](#)).

*Ephesians*: [Eph. 1:10](#).

*1 Nephi*: [1 Ne. 22:1–28](#).

*2 Nephi*: [2 Ne. 6:5–18](#); [2 Ne. 9:1–3](#); [2 Ne. 30:1–8](#).

*Jacob:* [Jacob 5:1–77](#); [Jacob 6:1–4](#).

*Helaman:* [Hel. 15:1–17](#).

*Mormon:* [Morm. 7:10](#).

*Doctrine and Covenants:* [D&C 45:24–25](#); [D&C 58:45](#); [D&C 86:8–9\\*](#); [D&C 90:8–11\\*](#); [D&C 96:7](#); [D&C 109:57–67](#) ([D&C 109:57–58, 60, 67\\*](#)); [D&C 110:11–12](#); [D&C 113:7–8](#); [D&C 132:30](#).

*Abraham:* [Abr. 2:8–11\\*](#); [Abr. 3:14](#).

*Joseph Smith—Matthew:* [JS—M 1:26–31\\*](#).

*Joseph Smith—History:* [JS—H 1:41](#).

Space will permit only brief quotations from three of these scriptures (italics added for emphasis):

*Abraham 2:9–11:* “Thou shalt be a blessing *unto thy seed* after thee, that in their hands *they shall bear this ministry and Priesthood unto all nations*; and I will bless them through thy name; for *as many as receive this Gospel shall be called after thy name, and shall be accounted thy seed*, and shall rise up and bless thee, as their father; ... and in thy seed after thee (that is to say, the literal seed, or the seed of the body) shall all the families of the earth be blessed, even with the blessings of the Gospel, which are the blessings of salvation, even of life eternal.” [[Abr. 2:9–11](#)]

*Doctrine and Covenants 86:8–9:* “Therefore, thus saith the Lord *unto you, with whom the priesthood hath continued through the lineage of your fathers—for ye are lawful heirs*, according to the flesh, and have been hid from the world with Christ in God.” [[D&C 86:8–9](#)]

*Doctrine and Covenants 109:57–58, 60, 67:* “That all the ends of the earth may know that we, thy servants, have heard thy voice, and that thou hast sent us; that from among all these, *thy servants, the sons of Jacob, may gather out the righteous*. ... Now these words, O Lord, we have spoken before thee, concerning the revelations and commandments which thou hast given *unto us, who are identified with the Gentiles*. ... And may all the scattered remnants of Israel, who have been driven to the ends of the earth, come to a knowledge of the truth, believe in the Messiah, and be redeemed from oppression, and rejoice before thee.” [[D&C 109:57–58, 60, 67](#)]

## Statements from Church Leaders

Several leaders of the Church in this dispensation have discussed various aspects of the topic of heirship and adoption.

**“Are most members of the Church literal descendants of Abraham by birth?”**

President Joseph Fielding Smith made it clear that a majority of the members of the Church today are descendants of Israel and thus of Abraham:

“The Lord said he would scatter Israel among the Gentile nations, and by doing so he would bless the Gentile nations with the blood of Abraham. Today we are preaching the gospel in the world and we are gathering out, according to the revelations given to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and other prophets, the scattered sheep of the House of Israel. These scattered sheep are coming forth mixed with Gentile blood from their Gentile forefathers. Under all the circumstances it is very possible that the majority, almost without exception, of those who come into the Church in this dispensation have the blood of two or more of the tribes of Israel as well as the blood of the Gentiles.” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, 5 vols., Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1957–66, 3:63.)

On another occasion President Joseph Fielding Smith emphatically stated: “The great majority of those who become members of the Church are literal descendants of Abraham through Ephraim, son of Joseph.” (*Improvement Era*, Oct. 1923, p. 1149.)

While identifying the Lamanites as some of the children of Abraham, President Spencer W. Kimball wrote:

“The Lamanite is a chosen child of God, but he is not the only chosen one. There are many other good people including the Anglos, the French, the German, and the English, who are also of Ephraim and Manasseh. They, with the Lamanites, are also chosen people, and they are a remnant of Jacob. The Lamanite is not wholly and exclusively the remnant of Jacob which the Book of Mormon talks about. We are *all* of Israel! We are of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph through Ephraim and Manasseh. We are *all of us* remnants of Jacob.” (*The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*, Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982, pp. 600–601.)

Concerning the subject of the gathering of Israel, President Brigham Young stated:

“The set time is come for God to gather Israel, and for His work to commence upon the face of the whole earth, and the Elders who have arisen in this Church and Kingdom are actually of Israel.

“Take the Elders who are now in this house, and you can scarcely find one out of a hundred [who is not] of the house of Israel. ...

“Will we go to the Gentile nations to preach the Gospel? Yes, and gather out the Israelites, wherever they are mixed among the nations of the earth. ... Ephraim has become mixed with all the nations of the earth, and it is Ephraim that is gathering together. ...

“If there are any of the other tribes of Israel mixed with the Gentiles we are also searching for them. ... We want the blood of Jacob, and that of his father Isaac and Abraham, which runs in the veins of the people. ...

“It is the house of Israel we are after, and we care not whether they come from the east, the west, the north, or the south; from China, Russia, England, California, North or South America, or some other locality. ... The Book of Mormon came to Ephraim, for Joseph Smith was a pure Ephraimite, and the Book of Mormon was revealed to him.” (*Journal of Discourses* 2:268–69.)

*“Is it possible for the same person to be an Israelite by birth and yet be considered a Gentile?”*

Although President Young identified Joseph Smith as a “pure Ephraimite” in the above quotation, so far as the Prophet’s family or blood lines were concerned, Brigham Young and others have recognized that (1) Joseph Smith was from a Gentile nation and (2) some of Joseph Smith’s progenitors may have come from bloodlines other than that of Ephraim. (See *Journal of Discourses*, 2:268.)

President Joseph Fielding Smith also provided insight on how the term *Gentile* could apply to Joseph Smith even though he was a descendant of Jacob (Israel) through Joseph, the father of Ephraim:

“In this Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, the gospel came first to the Gentiles and then is to go to the Jews. However, the Gentiles who receive the gospel are, in the greater part, Gentiles who have the blood of Israel in their veins. There is a very significant statement in the words of Moroni as recorded on the title page of the Book of Mormon that it was ” ... ‘To come forth ... by way of the Gentile. ...’

“How did the Book of Mormon come forth? By the hand of Joseph Smith. Yet we read in the Book of Mormon [see [2 Ne. 3:7–15](#)] that Joseph Smith is the descendant of Joseph who was sold into Egypt by his brethren, nevertheless he came by ‘way of the Gentile,’ according to Moroni’s prediction.” (*Answers to Gospel Questions*, 4:39.)

Thus, Joseph Smith was of the house of Israel so far as his family or blood lines were concerned, but he came from a Gentile nation and thus might also be considered a Gentile in the political or geographical sense.

*“How can a Gentile by birth be ‘adopted’ into the house of Israel?”*

In considering the principle of adoption, the Brethren consistently refer to the significant allegory of the tame and wild olive tree contained in Jacob, chapter 5. [[Jacob 5](#)] It is instructive to read and ponder that chapter in company with the following quotations pertaining to those who might be of Gentile blood who have been baptized into the Church:

BRIGHAM YOUNG: “If any of the Gentiles will believe, we will lay our hands upon them that they may receive the Holy Ghost, and the Lord will make them of the house of Israel. They will be broken off from the wild olive tree, and be grafted into the good and tame olive tree, and will partake of its sap and fatness. ... It is so with the House of Israel and the Gentile nations; if the Gentiles are grafted into the good olive tree they will partake of its root and fatness.” (*Journal of Discourses*, 2:269.)

Joseph Fielding Smith: “Every person who embraces the gospel becomes of the house of Israel. In other words, they become members of the chosen lineage, or Abraham’s children through Isaac and Jacob unto whom the promises were made. The great majority of those who become members of the Church are literal descendants of Abraham through Ephraim, son of Joseph. Those who are not literal descendants of Abraham and Israel must become such, and when they are baptized and confirmed they are grafted into the tree and are entitled to all the rights and privileges as heirs.” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 3 vols., Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1954–56, 3:246.)

The clear teaching of the prophets is that few persons *not* of the blood of Abraham have become members of the Church in this dispensation; the terms “adopted into the house of Israel” or “assigned to a tribe of Israel” pertain *only* to those relatively few members.

It is important to remind ourselves that the blessings of eternity are guaranteed for *all* who are faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, regardless of their lineage. Furthermore, those blessings are withheld from anyone who is disobedient and unfaithful, again regardless of ancestry. As Nephi stated: “Behold, the Lord esteemeth all flesh in one; he that is righteous is favored of God.” ([1 Ne. 17:35](#).) And Paul reminds us, “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel.” ([Rom. 9:6](#).)

*“What special responsibilities are held by Ephraimites in this dispensation?”*

President Joseph Fielding Smith and others have made it abundantly clear that the descendants of Ephraim hold the presiding keys to carry forth the work of the Restoration and of the gathering of Israel in the last days. His statement is as follows:

“The members of the Church, most of us of the tribe of Ephraim, are of the remnant of Jacob. We know it to be the fact that the Lord called upon the descendants of Ephraim to commence his work in the earth in these last days. We know further that he has said that he set Ephraim, according to the promises of his birthright, at the head. Ephraim receives the ‘richer blessings,’ these blessings being those of presidency or direction. The keys are with Ephraim. It is Ephraim who is to be endowed with power to bless and give to the other tribes, including the Lamanites, their blessings. All the other tribes of Jacob, including the Lamanites, are to be crowned with glory in Zion by the hands of Ephraim. ...

“That the remnants of Joseph, found among the descendants of Lehi, will have part in this great work is certainly consistent, and the great work of this restoration, the building of the temple and the City of Zion, or New Jerusalem, will fall to the lot of the descendants of Joseph, but it is Ephraim who will stand at the head and direct the work.” (*Doctrines of Salvation*, 2:250–51; italics in original removed.)

From what the prophets have said, then, most members of the Church come from Gentile nations, but they have some Israelite ancestors in their lineage. Therefore, they are not “assigned to” or “adopted into” the house of Israel. They are legal heirs of the covenant, and the lineage proclaimed in their patriarchal blessings identifies the blood line that ties them back to Abraham.

## Notes

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