

## **Views from the Pews: Zebulun and Naphtali**

Geographic names given in Biblical texts may seem tedious and irrelevant to us who cannot visualise the places or the history of those far-off lands. But place names are full of significance that helps us understand more clearly what we are reading.

Zebulun and Naphtali were two of the twelve tribes of Israel. Zebulun was named for the sixth son born of Jacob and his first wife, Leah, and Naphtali was named after the younger of two sons born to Jacob and Bilhah, a maidservant of Jacob's second wife, Rachel. After Joshua and the Israelites took possession of Canaan in around 1400 BC, Joshua divided the land among the twelve tribes. The descendants of Zebulun and Naphtali were assigned lands north and west of the lake that was later known as the Sea of Galilee.

After the death of King Solomon (922 BC), the Israelites separated into the northern Kingdom of Israel (representing 10 tribes) and the Kingdom of Judah in the south. In 734 BCE the Naphtalites were conquered by the Assyrian king Tiglath-pileser III. The rest of the northern kingdom was over-run by the Assyrians thirteen years later, in 721 BC, and its tribes dispersed. The Israelites who were deported into slavery, and those who remained behind, were gradually assimilated by Gentile peoples. Their land became known as 'Galilee of the Gentiles'.

Why does Matthew think it important to tell us that Jesus moved to Capernaum, in the "territory of Zebulun and Naphtali" to begin his ministry? (Matthew 4:13). A Biblical commentary by Mark Shea points out that Zebulun and Naphtali were the very first tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel to lose their identity and their honour to pagan invaders, and so were 'brought into contempt' (Isaiah 9:1). That experience might well have made the surviving minorities of the two tribes feel as if they were 'dwelling in darkness' (9:2). But Matthew offers consolation, long predicted (his favourite confirmation of truth) in the full version of Isaiah's prophecy, that those same downtrodden people will be the first to see 'a great light' (Isaiah 9:2, Mat 4:16). His point then? That Jesus — the son of David, and light of the world — is beginning his restoration of the Davidic kingdom at ground zero, where God's covenant judgment had fallen seven centuries before.

Truly, a bit of background information can double the impact of the plain text.

*Kim King*