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# **Hebrew Israelism:**

**An Expression of**

# **African-American Diasporic Identity**

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## —Abstract—

This thesis has three goals. The first goal is to provide a succinct version of African American history through the lens of identity development in diaspora peoples. There are two critical rationales in understanding African American history as a diasporic experience: a sympathetic struggle to understand and appreciate the depth and complexity of African American identity and to further understand the experience and result of having identity systemically externally imposed. The second goal of the thesis is to both define Hebrew Israelism and to ethnographically describe two Hebrew Israelite communities. As I discuss in the introduction, New Religious Movements are often difficult to define especially when there is an apparent absence of central text or doctrine whereby all definitions must come through comparative analysis. In chapter 2, I discuss the history of Hebrew Israelism in America and the critical transition from metaphorical connection with the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible to the belief that African Americans are in fact the true Israelites stolen from Africa hundreds of years ago. Combined with this Hebrew Israelite history, the ethnographies of the communities in chapters 3 and 4 seek to provide an insight into the beliefs, priorities, and practices of Hebrew Israelism. The third and final goal of this thesis is to wonder how Jews (or Historical Jews as defined in this thesis) might interact with, understand, and navigate a group of people who vehemently believe that they are the true Israelites. Supersessionism is, for many Jews, to be anticipated from religious traditions who claim the Hebrew Bible as a foundational text, and yet rarely do the supersessionist claims deny the truth in history of Historical Jews. This final chapter seeks to navigate the dilemma between being tolerant of the Black Hebrew Israelite philosophical and theological connections with the Hebrew Bible, which are palpable, and the inherent need to protect Historical Judaism's rightful claim to be Judaism. It is my sincere hope that this thesis creates opportunities for open-minded dialogue and causes those who read it to ask what it means for groups outside of Historical Judaism to find meaning and purpose in Torah.

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*In the future to come,  
all prayers  
will be prayers of thanksgiving...*

—Vayiqra Rabbah 9:7

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## **Introduction: Who and What are the Black Hebrew Israelites?**

In the comparative study of New Religious Movements, the goal is twofold: to dissect and understand the source of the various ideologies and world views central to the NRM and, secondly, to ethnographically understand the current state and direction of the NRM. New Religious Movements are often difficult to define and the idea of “new-ness”, both in terms of age and ideology, is rarely a deciding factor in the determination of labeling a religious phenomenon as such.<sup>1</sup> A study of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement (BHIM), in its variety, diversity and complexity, requires a nuanced understanding and an open mind to understand both the historical factors that led to its emergence and the socio-religious practices that inform its various iterations within Black Israelism today. Defining who and what the Black Hebrew Israelites are is exceedingly difficult and, unsurprisingly, this task makes up a significant amount of the discourse surrounding Black Hebrew Israelite Studies.

There are two primary distinct categories of Black Hebrew Israelites:

### Black Jews:

There are those Hebrew Israelites who, in spite of having no connection or reverence for Historical Judaism<sup>2</sup>, practice Judaism in a way that would be recognizable to the Historical Jewish community, for example, in terms of dietary customs, ritual practice, ritual garb, Torah

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<sup>1</sup> Gallagher, E. V. (2007). “Cults” and “New Religious Movements.” *History of Religions*, 47(2/3), 205–220. Page 1.

<sup>2</sup> I am using this term in reference to the groups of people who have, to varying degrees, adhered to Rabbinic Judaism since at least the Second Temple Period.

reading, the rejection of the New Testament, and overall adherence to what Historical Jews call Rabbinic Judaism.<sup>3</sup> Despite these similarities, religion theorist and historian Andre Key argues that Historical Judaism and Black Judaism are entirely different, convergent products of two entirely different histories.<sup>4</sup> This reality raises stark and important questions about what it means to be Jewish, who holds the gatekeeping power of defining who is Jewish, and what such naming power might look like in an exceedingly pluralistic world. This topic, among other pressing issues, will certainly be discussed further in the sixth and final chapter of this thesis.



Scholarly discourse has typically defined this group as “Black Jews,” a confusing and loaded term seeing as there are many Historical Jews of color who do not fit this academic classification. In other words, there is a necessary scholarly distinction between Black Jews and Historical Jews who are black. While Black Jews are not the primary focus of this thesis, it is certainly worth briefly introducing their characteristics given the uniqueness of their story. The Black Jews of Harlem are an expression, in no small part, of the Great Migration. This group of African Americans, reaching numbers in the hundreds, founded at least four churches by 1930 in New York City: the Commandment Keepers (1921), the Moorish Zionist Temple (1921), Beth B’nai Abraham (1923), Gospel of the Kingdom Temple (1931). The most auspicious and well-

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<sup>3</sup> Gold, R. S. (2003). The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939. *American Quarterly*, 55(2), 179–225.

<sup>4</sup> Key, A. E. (2014). Toward a typology of Black Hebrew religious thought and Practice. *Journal of Africana Religions*, 2(1), 31.

documented of these was The Commandment Keepers Holy Church of the Living God founded by Rabbi Matthew in 1921.<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Matthew, who saw the value and uplift from strengthened community efforts, said that his incentive for pursuing a life of Judaism was, in large part based on the fact that, “the philosophy of the Jews is to acquire wealth and command respect...[and I am] certain that the sooner the black man is imbued with this philosophy, the sooner will come the race’s forward movement.”<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Matthew, who frequently cited Ethiopia’s connection to King Solomon, purported the belief that “the black man *is* a Jew.”<sup>7</sup>

#### Hebrew Israelites:

The other primary group understood to occupy the category of “Black Hebrew Israelites” are most aptly defined as “Hebrew Israelism”. At its core, is the belief that Africans, or more immediately African Americans and Afro-Caribbean peoples, are the descendants of the dispersed 12 tribes of Israel, God’s Chosen Nation who will one day rule over the earth.<sup>8</sup> Historian and professor of African American Studies at Pennsylvania State University Wilson Jeremiah Moses wrote, “a central idea and common trait of black American Jewish separatist

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<sup>5</sup> Weisenfeld, J. (2021, March). “We are the Ethiopian Hebrews, Brothers to the Fair White Jew”: Race, Religion, and Jewish Identity in Harlem. Jews, Race, and Religion Series. University of Pennsylvania; Katz Center.

<sup>6</sup> Gold, Roberta S. “The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003, pp. 179–225, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30041968>. Page 1.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Dorman, J. S. (2013). *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions*. Oxford University Press, 4.



groups has been a belief that *all black people* are the chosen people of God.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, “chosen-ness” is directly related to the way in which these groups perceive the nature of the ancient Israelites, namely as black. Jacob Dorman, in his book *Chosen People*, argues that the belief of being the dispersed ancient Israelites is all but confirmed by the connection between the “belief in redemptive ethnic suffering of contemporary African-descended populations” and a “theodicy of deserved punishment” as explicitly described in the King James Version of the Bible in Deuteronomy 28.<sup>10</sup> In one interview with a Hebrew Israelite, I asked if there was any process of initiation or conversion and I was told, “If you bear witness to the curses in Deuteronomy 28, thats it. Thats what we study.”<sup>11</sup> I would even go so far as to argue that this particular Biblical passage is the central scripture of Black Hebrew Israelism in that its content, with regard to its curses for the Nation of Israel, overlaps uncannily with the African American experience.

Hebrew Israelites, in most cases, make vehement claims against Christianity (perhaps more accurately termed Historical Christianity), however many iterations of the movement do believe that Jesus, often called Yeshuah or Yahawashai, is and was the Messiah. The Hebrew Israelites are highly critical of the interpretive nature of Rabbinic Judaism and favor an “originalist”



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<sup>9</sup> Key.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Weisman, B., & Y., Yagai. (2021, September 22). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal. .

interpretation of the text, which to Hebrew Israelites refers to the 1611 King James Version of the Bible including the Apocrypha. They reject Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, which are often referred to as distractions, “pagan”, “man-made”, or “folly days” in favor of Biblical Feast Days like the Feast of Booths (Sukkot), the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), New Moon Feasts, and Saturday is the day of rest. Hebrew Israelites celebrate the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), as well.<sup>12</sup> Many communities seem to be separated by gender in terms of worship spaces and clothing. Clothing is gender normative and specific, with men’s clothing having fringed tassels on the hem of their shirts based on Hebrew Israelite Biblical interpretation of Numbers 15:38 regarding the attachment of fringes to the corners of clothing.<sup>13</sup> With regard to dietary observance, Hebrew Israelites refer to the statutes in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 as binding and yet, according to ethnographic interviews, acknowledge a varying degree of practice.<sup>14</sup> Circumcision is performed on the 8th day of a male child’s life, but there is not a ceremony as there is in Historic Judaism. I asked a Hebrew Israelite about the way in which sin is understood. She explained that “we are in captivity as a people so we try [to keep the commandments] as accurately as possible. If not, we repent and keep moving.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Holy days: True nation israelite congregation*. True Nation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.truenation.org/give>

<sup>13</sup> *In Activ8 Today we hear about jesus predicting his own ...* (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://stmaryschurchfetcham.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/activ8-session-26th-feb-2021-jesus-predicts-his-death.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. Personal.

<sup>15</sup> Weisman, B., & H., B. (2021, August 24). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

Both types of Black Hebrew Israelites (Black Jews and Hebrew Israelism) have much to contribute in the way of understanding one facet of the African American experience. Namely the pan-African, black pride movement to re-associate with the continent of Africa having been forcibly been removed. One particularly well-documented group of Hebrew Israelites hail from the South Side of Chicago. In 1967 a group of 134 members of the Abeta Israel Hebrew Center, through the divine revelation of their prophet Louis Bryant (known by his followers as Nasi Shaliach Ben Yehuda) and their apparent Messiah, Gerson Parker (also known as Nasi Hashalom), moved their community from Chicago to Liberia, Africa. While this move echoes of Marcus Garvey's Black Nationalism and "Back to Africa" movement both in practice and desired location, the Liberian government was not keen on their arrival and refuse these faithfuls citizenship. Eventually, in 1969, the group moved from Africa to Dimona, Israel and have since set up a community of several thousand members who believe that they are the true chosen people of God, punished and dominated for thousands of years of refusing God's law, only to reemerge conscious of their true heritage.<sup>16</sup>

Hebrew Israelism is undoubtedly here to stay. This religious movement has philosophical roots that are at least hundreds of years old and yet the reception and discourse has consistently been less than favorable of these groups often allowing fringe expressions of Hebrew Israelism with terroristic tendencies to dominate public perception. The fact is, most people, especially Historical Jews, believe the claims of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement is baseless,

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<sup>16</sup> Lounds, M. (1981). *Israel's Black Hebrews: Black Americans in search of identity*. University Press of America, 53.

supersessionist, and not worthy of being taken seriously (even though the belief in the seemingly unbelievable is no new element of religiosity). It is the intention of this thesis to explore the ways in which Hebrew Israelism is a genuine expression of African American Diaspora Religious Identity. It is not my intention to place value or critique the Hebrew Israel movement, but rather to shed light on the origins of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement, to better understand real Hebrew Israelite communities and their practice, and to discuss the paralleled institutions and ideologies within the Black American experience and the historical Jewish experience.

## **Chapter 1: Diasporic Consciousness Among African Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries**

To understand the Hebrew Israelite movement in America, one must first understand the streams of histories that produced the movement. The Hebrew Israelite movement did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather is the fruit of a tree with many branches and roots deeply entrenched in American soil and African American religion.<sup>17</sup> The intention of this chapter is to follow the through-line from the moment slave ships first left Africa to the socio-cultural search for identity that produced Hebrew Israelism. By deeply delving into various critical moments throughout African American diasporic history, fostering an understanding of how these historical junctures contributed to the various expressions of African American diasporic identity, and the intrinsic relationship between the diasporic search for identity and Hebrew Israelism, it is my hope that this chapter provides an invaluable companion to understanding one branch of the African American experience.

The foundational issue and impetus for the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement is the search for an identity that likely began as the first slave ships departed from the shores of West Africa over 400 years ago. It is no secret that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was founded under the auspices of Christian Imperialism. In fact, the phrase “God, Gold, and Glory” is the hallmark of the age of exploration that began in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, setting the foundations for what would become the Triangle Trade routes between Europe, Africa, and the Americas. Katie Geneva Cannon writes, “the enslavers of Africans used missiologic of imminent

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<sup>17</sup> Key.

parousia as a convenient rhetorical weapon for deepening the conjunction between evangelism and judgement.”<sup>18</sup> This urge for missionary work and the desire for mass conversion of the global “heathen” population allowed these missions to justify such grotesque, ungodly behavior. The merchants who peddled in chattel slavery believed that the only way to solve the “mental and spiritual deficiencies of Africans” would be, as Historian K.G. Cannon puts it, “under the tutelage of Christians, who knew how to discipline black bodies without distinguishing the life within.”<sup>19</sup> NOTE: The irony of using the Bible to justify this behavior and then teaching the Bible to those who are on the receiving end of the violence, is that the hypocrisy of the violence would become evident the more the enslaved learned of the true message of the Bible.

Slave resistance was an important part of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the history of American Chattel slavery. Not surprisingly, often times that resistance began during Middle Passage, the treacherous Atlantic route slaving ships took from Africa to the Americas. The conditions on these boats were intolerable and deadly at worst. There are stories of sharks that circled the waters off the coast of Africa, swarming the ships and waiting for those slaves who would rather jump overboard and be eaten by sharks than leave their ancestral lands.<sup>20</sup> Mutinies onboard slave ships were also common and well documented by the captains of these

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<sup>18</sup> Cannon, K. G. (2008). Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 24(1), 127–134.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Wolfe, A. B. (2021, July 1). *Thrown to the sharks*. Encyclopedia Virginia. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://encyclopediaofvirginia.org/thrown-to-the-sharks/>.

hellish vessels. Perhaps the most famous schooner rebellion is the story of the *Amistad*, the 1839 rebellion which, surprisingly, resulted in an 1841 United States Supreme Court decision upholding the freedom of these illegally captured souls.<sup>21</sup>

For those experiencing American slavery, resistance took a wide range of forms. It is important to note that here, American slavery, refers not only to what is now the United States of America, but the stronghold institutions of slavery in places like Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica as well. There were violent rebellions, of course, but resistance took many other forms. Slaves developed their own languages like Gullah, created songs and dances, developed new cooking styles using anything and everything that was available to them, and some slaves even managed to find time to plant and keep gardens. One of the most important forms of resistance was religious practice. At first, many slaves incorporated ancestral practices that were brought to America on slave ships. It did not take long for the various cultures and backgrounds represented on the plantations to become an amalgam of these various traditions, rites and beliefs like charms, practices of conjuring. Ironically, the version of Christianity the Slave Masters used to legitimize their atrocities and taught to the slaves, began to shift in the hearts and minds of slaves toward a version of Christianity that did not resemble the Christianity of their oppressors when introduced to the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>21</sup> National Archives and Records Administration. (n.d.). *The Amistad Case*. National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad>.

It requires no mental leap to see why slaves began to associate metaphorically with the Israelites of the Exodus story. The parallels between the Exodus story and the experience of American slaves are obvious. They became immensely meaningful in the development of slave Christianity and their forms of resistance, thus playing an integral role in the development of African American identity.<sup>22</sup> This deep connection plays out, for example, in certain spirituals and infamous stories such as Harriet Tubman acquiring the name Moses. There are, however, certain elements of slave religion that provide perhaps concrete ideas that become foundational to the development of both African American Christianity and the advent of Hebrew Israelism.

One such element is appropriately called the African American Jeremiad. A Jeremiad is a literary device inspired by the lengthy and prophetic laments of the Prophet Jeremiah who lived and prophesied in the years leading up to the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. Much like the biblical book of Jeremiah, these laments are characterized as “moralistic texts, [where] the authors acrimoniously lamented the condition of society and its morals in a stern tenor of sustained invective and utilized prophecy as a means of predicting society’s ominous demise.”<sup>23</sup> Within the African American Jeremiad were critiques of W.J. Harrell calls the “social, religious, economic, and political conditions of blacks during the early republic.”<sup>24</sup> The warnings inherent in these Jeremiads, warnings from

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<sup>22</sup> Dorman, 4.

<sup>23</sup> Harrell, W. J. (2011). *Origins of the African American Jeremiad: The Rhetorical Strategies of Social Protest and Activism, 1760-1861*. McFarland, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 7.



the black community unto the white community, are at the core of this redemptive fervor. Just as the early white colonialists believed in the idea of the divine destiny to tame the Americas through Manifest Destiny, Keith Gilyard and Anissa Wardi conclude that the African American Jeremiad is a “shrewd variation of the American one [whereby] blacks are cast as a chosen people within the parameters of the nations archetypal civil myth—so, they are deemed to be a chosen people in the midst of a chosen people.”<sup>25</sup>

This notion of chosen-ness is an understandable response to the experience of being the “other”. In 1846, to a crowd in Paisley Scotland Frederick Douglas lamented, “I am a man before I am an American. To be a man is above being an American. To be a human being is to have claims above all the claims of nationality. But I have no nation. America only welcomes me to her shores as a brute. She spurns the idea of treating me in any there way than as a brute—she would not receive me as a man.”<sup>26</sup> This lament speaks to the core of the African American experience: If I do not belong here, where do I belong? And, as Louis Armstrong famously crooned, “what did I do to be so Black and Blue?” It makes perfect sense for a slave or an oppressed Black American to respond to racism and oppression with self-confirmation and self-edification; to conclude that they must be special; a unique threat. In this way, Black Nationalism in America arose from similar conditions that produced Zionism among the Jews of eastern Europe who experienced violent persecution in the 19th century.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 11.

As early as the turn of the 19th century, free African Americans began assembling the building blocks to a Black Nationalist movement as a response to the realization that the hope of being seen as equal to their oppressors might never reach fruition. These early Black Nationalist institutions, like the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons of Boston, Free African Society, and the Universal Negro Improvement Association would serve as the foundation for many important civil and religious movements in African American history.<sup>27</sup> For peoples stolen from a multitude of lands and cultures, Pan-African Black Nationalism proved to be a difficult endeavor for three reasons. For one, African American people had no single nation to yearn for or to call their own. The second hurdle was the institution of slavery itself; the birth of Black Nationalism began 65 years before chattel slavery would end and the prospect of an African American country seemed worlds away. Perhaps the greatest hurdle in the exercise of Black Nationalism is the fact that the experience of identity for so many African Americans was externally imposed and determined by the oppressor.

The idea of Black Nationalism, to be successful, had to engage with the emergent ideas of European and American nationalism of the early 20th century and simultaneously reject the external labels and associations of antithetic white/European nationalist movements. In this way, Black Nationalist thought results from the complex reality of African Americans, who were subjected to racist impositions of identity and also seen as different from the prototypical American. By long denying African Americans full participation in the American experience

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<sup>27</sup> Harris, Jr., Robert L. (1979). Early Black Benevolent Societies, 1780-1830. *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn, 1979), pp. 603-625.

(the last American Public school to be desegregated was Cleveland High School in Cleveland, Mississippi in 2016), a response such as Black Nationalism should come as no surprise as self-determination is something for which only those marginalized groups must fend.

Black Nationalism has seen many iterations and formulations over the course of the last two hundred years and the ideology has seen many thinkers regarding the plight of African Americans as a diasporic people. Two prominent thinkers that shaped early Black Nationalist discourse perhaps more than any others were W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey. DuBois (1868-1963) was a prolific and life-long contributor to the burgeoning arena of Black Studies. His works helped shape the way African American discourse permeated American discourse and academia. Arguably DuBois' most important contribution is the introduction of the paradoxical term "double consciousness" in his seminal work "The Souls of Black Folk" (1903). J.P. Pittman describes this double consciousness as, "a source of inward 'twoness' putatively experienced by African-Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society."<sup>28</sup> This term seeks to elucidate the exhausting experience by which African Americans must navigate daily life as both a person and a person of color simultaneously.

DuBois wrote, "twelve million American Negroes have the inborn capacity to accomplish just as much as any nation of twelve million anywhere in the world ever accomplished, and this is not because they are Negroes, but because they are human." Black

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<sup>28</sup> Pittman, J. P. (2016, March 21). *Double consciousness*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Retrieved November 10, 2021, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>.

Nationalism to DuBois was the radical idea that Black People are, in fact, people; capable people. In his essay, “A Negro Nation Within the Nation,” DuBois argues that Black Nationalism exists only so long as there are black people, within the nation, taking part in expressions of cultural, economic, political, and religious life. DuBois’ nationalism is thus an expression of Black self-determination in which the African American community does not depend on the proverbial “white savior” for means of sustainability.

Marcus Garvey (1887-1940) was born in Saint Ann’s Bay on the Caribbean Island of Jamaica. He was best known for his flamboyant brand of Pan-Africanism and Black Nationalism. While Garvey was not the father of Black Nationalism, he is considered by many to be the champion of the ideology. Garvey is credited with merging the various nationalist ideologies after WWI.<sup>29</sup> J. Herman Blake suggests that Black Nationalism represented an authentic expression of African American struggle for identity. He points to two experiences of African Americans that created and continue to create fertile ground for Black Nationalism:

Black Nationalist thought is a consequence of the duality of the experience of Afro-Americans, a people who are identified by racial characteristics as different from the “typical” American and denied full participation in this society for that reason, while, at the same time, they are expected to meet all the responsibilities of citizenship. It reflects the negative self-image which many black people have unconsciously developed, and the sense of hopelessness that has persisted in the Afro-American community as a consequence of being treated as inferiors.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science  
Vol. 382, Protest in the Sixties (Mar., 1969), pp. 15-25 (11 pages)

<sup>30</sup> Blake, 16.

By pointing to these two consistent *and* persistent realities within the African American experience, we should not be surprised that Black Nationalism has appeared as a consistent response to persecution and racism over the course of hundreds of years.

In February 1995, researchers at the American Association for the Advancement of Science announced that “The concept of Race...has no basis in fundamental human biology.”<sup>31</sup> While of course this is true on a scientific level, the statement holds no water on the socio-political plane, where race continues to play a major role in American discourse. What is most striking about the discussion of race is that the idea of race is always imposed upon by a group external to the group being racially categorized. Furthermore, when the externally imposed identity is reimagined by the imposed upon group, movements like “All Lives Matter” arise in protest. As Julia E. Liss notes, both Franz Boas and W.E.B. DuBois, “placed a critique of ‘race’ at the center of their scientific and political agendas, and both drew on a particular sensitivity to problems of identity formation.”<sup>32</sup> This external implication highlights the power dynamics that go into the issue of identity formation at the core of this chapter, begging the question: “What are the sociological implications of having one’s group identity determined by an external group?”

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<sup>31</sup> Diasporic Identities: The Science and Politics of Race in the Work of Franz Boas and W. E. B. Du Bois, 1894-1919. P. 127.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 128.

## Chapter 2: The History of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement: An Outgrowth of Diasporic African-American Consciousness

The history of the Black Hebrew Israelites is quite difficult to pin down. The resources we have at our disposal are individual testimony, ethnographic research, and the historical documentation of other similar expressions of cultural, social, and religious consciousness for the African American Diaspora. An important term to define in this section is the word Diaspora. Most broadly, the term diaspora is derived from the Greek *diaspeirein* ‘to disperse.’ The term is first used in the Septuagint in the phrase *esē diaspora en pasais basileias tēs gēs* ‘you shall be a dispersion in all kingdoms of the earth’; however the term was used to describe the Babylonian and Roman exiles of the Jews from the ancient land of Israel and has come to describe all peoples experiencing dispersion from their homelands.<sup>33</sup>

In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, America has begun to face a new reckoning with regard to its complicated and bloody past. America is beginning to realize that being American requires more thoughtfulness than the wholesome American veneer; a mere simplistic affirmation of one’s love of apple pie simply will no longer suffice. As a matter of history, America is rightfully associated with triumph, growth, wealth, and expansion, which for many is a source of pride and glory, and yet we must all recognize that these achievements, to some extent, came at the expense of a lot of people. This new awakening and reckoning demands that America the state and Americans must come to terms with the institutions and

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<sup>33</sup> Encyclopedia.com. (2022, January 27). " *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. *encyclopedia.com*. 25 Jan. 2022 . Encyclopedia.com. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.encyclopedia.com/philosophy-and-religion/judaism/judaism/diaspora>.

systems that enabled that apple pie to become so great in the first place. American history and African American history are both intertwined and completely separate at the same time. This complicated reality requires a nuanced look at the history of Hebrew Israelism, within the context of American history, from an unbiased lens guided by curiosity and intellectual honesty.

In my ethnographic research, I was met with secrecy, steeped in discomfort and distrust in the telling of the history of Hebrew Israelism. In part, this distrust seems to be a result of persecution. American perception of Hebrew Israelism is often an extrapolative understanding of behaviors of certain groups deemed as normative across various expressions of Hebrew Israelism. This oversimplification of Hebrew Israelism by the American public and the FBI, and a well-founded experience of intolerance toward beliefs that are deemed farfetched is at the core of Hebrew Israelite mistrust.<sup>34</sup> This chapter follows the path from emancipation, to the outgrowth of the black church, to the advent of Black Nationalism, and arrive at the various ways in which Hebrew Israelism behaves as a vessel for social unrest and change. Understanding the social discourse and conditions that produced Hebrew Israelism is essential in understanding the current state of Hebrew Israelism and may well behave as a predictor for where the Hebrew Israelite Movement is headed in the future.

While the Emancipation Proclamation technically freed slaves throughout the Confederacy (not loyal border states) on January 1, 1863, and Robert E. Lee's surrender

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<sup>34</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. Personal.

should have brought the institution of slavery to an immediate halt, the reality is vastly different.<sup>35</sup> Brutality and disregard for human life by slave owners and drivers was on full display as they forced slaves to remain in bondage until the slave owners were often forced, by threat of death, to stop their grotesque brand of inhumanity. One famous moment occurred when General Gordon Granger's heavily armed battalion informed slave owners of Galveston, Texas, that their slaves were to be freed and remain free on June 19, 1865 a day now called Juneteenth.<sup>36</sup> The system of slavery was so integral to the Southern way of life that various iterations of slavery continued long after the civil war (like sharecropping) and, in fact, some have lasted until today like the legal slavery supported by the prison industrial complex made legal by the advent of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

In the wake of the civil war, freed African Americans took one of three tacts in response to "freedom." Some stayed in the cotton belt and tried to make it as sharecroppers. Sharecropping is an agricultural practice whereby farmers would lease a plot of land from a plantation owner (often times, their previous Slave Master) and sell a portion of their harvest to the plantation while any profits were the sharecroppers to keep. That was, of course, after the sharecropper had purchased equipment, seeds, clothing, and any number of things from the plantation. Sharecropping was designed to keep the sharecropper in perpetual debt; a form of

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<sup>35</sup> National Archives and Records Administration. (n.d.). *The Emancipation Proclamation, 1863*. National Archives and Records Administration. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american\\_originals\\_iv/sections/nonjavatext\\_emancipation.html](https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals_iv/sections/nonjavatext_emancipation.html).

<sup>36</sup> Ima..., K. C. G., Commons, I. by W., & Baldwin, C. of J. (2021, June 18). *Juneteenth Story is Marred by Myth that Blacks Didn't Know they were Free*. The Forward. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://forward.com/opinion/471597/juneteenth-what-really-happened/>.



debtor's slavery.<sup>37</sup> Many former slaves fled north in hopes of economic prosperity and opportunity. This moment in African American history is known as the Great Migration and accounts for the African American populations of cities like Chicago, St. Louis, Cleveland, and New York City.

Still other recently freed African Americans fled west, namely to the great plains and newly stolen and colonized Oklahoma Territory. Several scholars of African American history, such as Hans Baer and Miller Singer, believe that Hebrew Israelism finds its roots in the symbolic identification with the Exodus story of the Hebrew Bible. In many ways, this connection was confirmed by those who fled west in the hopes of fleeing from racism, fleeing the institutions that enslaved them, and going forth toward the promise of true freedom. These freedom seekers were aptly called Exodusters. The aspirations of Exoduster leaders were, in many cases, to form all-Black towns and even states. And while self-determination was at the core of this westward migration, for many, this move had deep, religious and spiritual meaning.

For many of these Exodusters, "the exodus narrative was not simply a sacred text, a parable, or a religious metaphor for African American deliverance from slavery. Exodus was a sign of God's deliverance, a central organizing principle for the rise of black national consciousness, and a concrete process of migration."<sup>38</sup> One particular woman was quoted in

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<sup>37</sup> Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (n.d.). *Sharecropping*. Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sharecropping>.

<sup>38</sup> Dorman, 23.

the St. Louis Globe Democrat saying, “This is our Red Sea, right here in St. Louis. A’tween home and Kansas, and out of bondage for sure. We’s been set free by Master Lincoln, but it was just such another set free as Pharaoh give the children of Israel. You hear me child, then as is a’waving and is afraid is going to sink in this here Red Sea.”<sup>39</sup> This comparison between Lincoln and Pharaoh is striking and not one that I had previously considered. Along these lines, the nuance of Lincoln’s disposition towards newly freed African Americans has increasingly come under scrutiny as American historians have begun to wrestle with American History in a more nuanced and narrative-centric way. Lincoln was, of course, a product of his time and notably held opinions a person would identify as “white supremacy” today.

As a result of the combination of self-determinism and religious fervor, North Eastern Kansas and the Oklahoma territory were fertile ground for religious innovation. In addition to the rise of millennialism, the opportunity inherent in the Homesteaders Act of 1862, Pentecostal revivals, and the long-standing presence of the Holiness Movement, Black Determinism was at the core of this Black Westward expansion.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the moment was ripe for the Hebrew Israelite disposition to arise. In one conversation with a Hebrew Israelite leader from the True Nation Israelite Congregation, the congregation of Chapter 3, I asked, “How did the Hebrew Israelites re-discover this history which has been hidden from you for thousands of years?” While there were a few interesting replies, including the discussion of a Christian conspiracy to restrict people of African (or Israelite descent), one

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 27

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

member of the group offered a very interesting anecdote. He told me that when he first became involved with the True Nation Israelite Congregation, his grandmother had told him that they were not the first African Americans to come to this conclusion. In fact, he continued, when his grandmother was growing up in the 1920s in Oklahoma, her mother and father spoke of a man who had preached on the African American claim to the descendants of the Israelites.<sup>41</sup> That man's name was William S. Crowdy.

While the Anglo-Israelism of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints played a significant role in the popularization of the Israelite in America narrative, Crowdy was a similarly influential character in the history of Hebrew Israelism.<sup>42</sup> Born into slavery in 1847 in southern Maryland (ironically, not far from a 19th century freed slave colony outside of rural Farmville, Virginia, which called themselves the Free Blacks of Israel Hill), Crowdy spent much of his early freedom searching for a promised land. Drawn to Oklahoma by the promises of a "Promised Land" where one could, "sit under your own vine and fig tree," by Black politician and early Black Nationalist, Edward P. McCabe, Crowdy shared much of the same fervor as the other Exodusters.<sup>43</sup> In 1891, like many others, Crowdy bought land based on McCabe's prophetic promises. In spite of the hardships of life in turn of the 19th century Langston, Oklahoma, Black Homesteaders shaped the region through grit,

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<sup>41</sup> Q&A *with the A-Team Part 2*. (2021). October 4, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIPZ-Dx4ybo&t=563s>.

<sup>42</sup> Dorman, 68.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

and determination, inspiring Booker T. Washington to write, “The Negro towns that have sprung up...shall demonstrate the right of the Negro...to have a worth and permanent place in the civilization that American people are creating.”<sup>44</sup> Crowdy’s experience in the great plains defined by the ever-present sentiment of the lyrics, “Be courageous brother, and forget the past—the great and mighty problem of race has been solved at last,” undoubtedly shaped Crowdy’s new church. By “refiguring the past,” Crowdy solved the “‘great and mighty problem of race,’ by making African Americans into the descendants of the ancient Israelites, and creating an inclusive anti-racist church that accepted members regardless of race.”<sup>45</sup> His perspective forever changed, thus shaping his understanding of what would become Hebrew Israelism.

Eventually, Crowdy assembled his church called “The Church of God and Saints of Christ.” The church was not part of any movement and was entirely based on Crowdy’s charisma and his belief that African Americans descended from the Ancient Israelites.<sup>46</sup> For his followers, Crowdy was a prophet. According to testimony from an ethnography from 1946, his members stated that “if it was not for Prophet Crowdy, I would not be here.”<sup>47</sup> Crowdy was adamant that the purpose and goal of the Church of God and Saints of Christ was to “elevate

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Oliver, B. J. (1946). A Field Study of Some Newer Religious Groups in the United States. *Quarterly Journal of the Florida Academy of Sciences*, 9(1), 19–26. Page 25.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 24.

the status of the Negro by indicating that the colored race is a ‘chosen people.’”<sup>48</sup> By connecting the notion of chosen-ness with the effort of holistically elevating a trampled people, Crowdy sought to use religion as a vessel for social reform and rid racism from the African American experience. By connecting African Americans to the Tribes of Israel and the practices and beliefs of Historical Jews, this movement sought to, “satisfy particular needs, and gratify interests other than the purely religious.”<sup>49</sup>

The combination of Crowdy’s charisma, biblical knowledge, and life experiences led to a shift in the way Crowdy understood his faith. This transformational shift provided much of the foundation for the Hebrew Israelism he and his church would espouse. His transition began with Saturday Sabbath adherence, similar to the Seventh Day Adventists, and he promoted the act of foot washing as commanded by Jesus; and, contrary to many Christian groups, he believed that the commandments of the Hebrew Bible were not abolished, but rather religious imperatives.<sup>50</sup> Dorman found that “By 1906, the church was observing the Jewish calendar and feast days, observing the Sabbath on Saturday, and using some Hebrew.”<sup>51</sup> The group would celebrate their interpretation of the Biblical Passover with sacrifice, feasting, and the application of blood on their doorposts as a ward from death, reenacting the Passover ritual of the Exodus story. Perhaps most notably, while the adoration of the New Testament remained,

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<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Dorman, 46.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

the notion of Jesus' divinity was rejected in favor of viewing him as a prophet, a man who lived the ways of the commandments as a symbolic exemplar.<sup>52</sup>

Another foundational leader of the Hebrew Israelite movement was Frank Cherry. Southern Poverty Law Center points out that the beliefs espoused by Cherry were the basis for many beliefs against Historical Judaism that permeate various iterations of Hebrew Israelism today. According to the SPLC, Cherry founded a "black Jew" church in Chattanooga, Tennessee, after declaring himself a prophet. From the pulpit he declared that African Americans were the true descendants of the Tribes of Israel, that white people were, "inherently evil and hated by God," and that "the earth is square and that Jesus would return in the year 2000 to install blacks over whites through a race war."<sup>53</sup> Cherry is worth mentioning because, as the SPLC points out, his beliefs continue to inform and guide some of the hateful, or perhaps more accurately resentful, beliefs of certain factions of Hebrew Israelism.

It is worth mentioning that, while Crowdy and Cherry were leaders in the South and great plains, contemporaneously Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew, Rabbi Arnold Ford, and eventually Rabbi Julius Wilkins (Rabbi Yirmeyahu Israel) were busy building the Black Jews movement, which I discussed briefly in the introduction to this thesis. Their groups largely took root in New York City, specifically Harlem. Living between the Afro-Caribbean, Garveyism and Jewish Harlem, the Black Jews would embrace the idea that the original Jews

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>53</sup> *History of Hebrew Israelism*. Southern Poverty Law Center. (n.d.). Retrieved December 21, 2021, from <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>.

were black and, perhaps ironically embrace Historical, Ashkenazic Judaism as their normative practice. This movement developed Synagogue communities such as the Commandment Keepers, hymnals and liturgical innovations from Rabbi Ford. Rabbi Matthew would found the Ethiopian Rabbinical College in 1925 with the successful intention of ordaining Rabbis within this movement.

For the Hebrew Israelites with Messianic tendencies, like Crowdy, the historical experience of African Americans creates a portrait of souls yearning to be free. While many would argue that America is imbued with freedom for all, Nina Simone aptly said freedom:

Is just a feeling. It's like, how do you tell somebody how it feels to be in love? How are you going to tell anybody who has not been in love how it feels to be in love? You cannot do it to save your life. You can describe things to them, but you can't tell them; but you know it when it happens...I'll tell you what freedom is to me. NO FEAR! I mean, really, no fear. If I could have that half of my life, no fear, that's the closest I can describe it. That's not all of it, know what freedom means to me?<sup>54</sup>

In this way, freedom is not something that can be externally imposed and, quite contrarily, is something only an individual can know or feel for themselves. Within the context of the expression of Diasporic identities, this yearning for self-definition and to be free of the fears that coincide with the oppressive weight of one's identity being externally defined is all but paramount. For Hebrew Israelite identity expression, and more broadly African American Identity expression, "these movements satisfy particular needs, and gratify interests other than

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<sup>54</sup> (2016). *Nina: A Historical Perspective*. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPD8f2m8WGI>.

the purely religious.”<sup>55</sup> This is to say, Hebrew Israelism may provide opportunities for African Americans to “occupy important and respected positions that may be denied to them in wider society...[create] experiences and relationships that bolster self-respect, evaluations of one’s racial group, and psychological well-being.”<sup>56</sup> Beginning with Crowdy’s Church of God and Saint’s of Christ anti-racist, barrier-shattering beliefs about race in America, Hebrew Israelism has the potential to prove itself to be a movement that strives for Social Reform in America. Oliver wrote that “Religion has been used partially as a cloak to cover the social reform program of the movement, which is primarily to eliminate Negro race prejudice and discrimination.”<sup>57</sup>

There are two prevailing sociological methods used to understand the source and direction of Hebrew Israelism as an expression of African American Diasporic Identity. The first is, according to sociologists D.H. Demo and M. Hughes, to “examine the effects of group identification and group consciousness on other variables such as political participation, racial militancy, personal efficacy, and minority group self-esteem” while the second, according to Demo and Hughes, is to “identify the socioeconomic and demographic determinants of black identity.”<sup>58</sup> The formation of African American identity, according to this previously quoted sociological study, “Socialization And Racial Identity among Black Americans” by David H.

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<sup>55</sup> Oliver, 26.

<sup>56</sup> Demo, D. H., & Hughes, M. (1990). Socialization and racial identity among Black Americans. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 53(4), 364–374. Page 367

<sup>57</sup> Oliver, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Demo and Hughes, 364.



Demo and Michael Hughes, depends on the individual's experience of family, community and society as well as the group's experience within the sociological concept of the "feeling of closeness to similar others in ideas, feelings, and thoughts."<sup>59</sup> This study is paramount in understanding the continued success and relevancy of the Hebrew Israelite movement in this country and, perhaps, around the globe.

When considering the Black Hebrew Israelites, we must also understand their relationship to those who are external to their community and cause. In my conversations with Hebrew Israelite leadership, one trope I heard often was that Edom has been intentionally suppressing the truth about the Black Hebrew Israelites for millennia. Edom, biblically speaking, refers to the descendants of Esau and, in later literature (both in a Rabbinic Judaism Context, as well as early Christian writings), comes to refer to Rome, the seat of Christian power, for centuries. Hebrew Israelites believe Rome intentionally corrupted the true continuation of Israelite history by changing the calendars from the Biblical calendars, by renaming and inventing extra-biblical holidays (which the True Nation Israelite Congregation refers to as "folly-days"), and by enslaving the true chosen people of God, the Black Hebrew Israelites. True Nation Israelite Congregation, to support this belief in Edom's intentional deceit, cited Psalm 83:4-6 in the King James Bible which reads, "Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance. For they

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee: The tabernacles of Edom, and the Ishmaelites; of Moab, and the Hagarenes...”

However, the absence of orthodoxy, historical accuracy, founding figures (who are consistently considered founding figures outside of scholarly discourse), or the existence of foundational texts outside of Deuteronomy 28 contribute in large part to the criticism the Hebrew Israelite movement regularly faces. Hebrew Israelite scholar Andre E. Key writes,

Black religion is qualitatively different in its history, development, and meaning from the faith traditions with which it shares myths, sacred texts, and doctrines. While it does share these elements with Western religions, I am asserting that Black religion is a separate religious system unto itself, in the same way that Christianity is its own faith, even though it shares myths, sacred texts, and doctrines with Judaism.<sup>60</sup>

It is, perhaps, precisely because of the absence of these answers for so many African Americans that Hebrew Israelism speaks to a need for answers. According to Key, William Jeremiah Moses discusses the way in which Black Chosen-ness may well be “a central idea and common trait of black American separatist groups [believing] that *all black people* are the chosen people of God and that Biblical Hebrews...were black.”<sup>61</sup>

African Americans who experience Black Christianity from an early age, participate in Black family events, and develop a black identity (an admittedly nebulous idea in the study of identity formation), there is no shortage of reasons that African Americans might be able to see themselves in the Hebrew Israelite movement. In reference to an African American

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<sup>60</sup> Key.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*

sociological study from sociologist Marie Ferguson Peters, Demo and Hughes state that “racial socialization in black families suggests that ‘Building self-respect and pride concerning their racial identity undergirds every parent’s childrearing philosophy.’”<sup>62</sup> This is directly in line with Garvey’s famous notion, utilized by Bob Marley in *Redemption Song* that, “We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Nora L. Rubel says that Hebrew Israelism and Black Judaism is part of a Black religion universe that is shared and occupied by several different religious expressions, concluding that all language and symbolism of these groups is concerned with, “combatting the images projected by an antiblack racist society.”<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps the culminating ideas that are the synthesis of this convergence of Africana Religion, Black Nationalism, and Hebrew Israelite identity is the notion of defining the boundaries of what makes up a nation, namely the Hebrew Israelites. For many Jews, Judaism operates as both a religious practice and a cultural identity. Similarly, Hebrew Israelism is, for its adherents, a National Identity whereby one’s ancestral story and history determines one’s citizenship. The perception of being the Chosen People of God carries immense implications.

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<sup>62</sup> Demo and Hughes, 364.

<sup>63</sup> 17, A. U. T. O. D. I. D. A. C. T. (2021, October 20). *Marcus Mosiah Garvey: Emancipate your african mind!* New York Amsterdam News. Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2017/08/31/marcus-mosiah-garvey-emancipate-your-african-mind/>.

<sup>64</sup> Curtis, E. E., & Sigler, D. B. (2009). Chased Out of Palestine: Prophet Cherry's Church of God and Early Black Judaisms in the United States. In *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American religions*. essay, Indiana University Press. Page 57.

According to Wilson Jeremiah Moses, Black Hebrews believe that, “*all black people* are the chosen people of God and that Biblical Hebrews...were black.”<sup>65</sup>

Situating the Black Hebrew Israelites within this “constellation” of beliefs suggests a widely held yearning for membership identity and at the same time narrows the scope in defining Hebrew Israelism. At the core of creating these borders and definitions is the idea that “those persons and/or groups which maintain a clear identity with Black Jewish teachings which are not accepted by the world’s Jewish community” still yearn for membership in a community that addresses their lived socio-religious needs. In this way, James Landing defines Black Judaism as a “form of social protest, as opposed to a form of Jewish oppression” that “emerged as a social movement in the Southern United States within the emerging independent black churches during the Jim Crow period” and whose “origins are integrally linked with Christian teaching about the future of Jews as set forth in the millennial chronology.”<sup>66</sup> It is “a form of Black cultural nationalism which, as a social protest movement, has not yet been accorded its true place and importance in Afro-American history,” and it “diffused rapidly into Southern Africa where it fused with Holiness and Pentecostal teachings in the Zionist churches in a variant known as Judaic Christianity.”<sup>67</sup> It also spread into Latin America.” All of this is to say that, conclusively, the Hebrew Israelite movement is clearly one based on a wide range of religious and social identities and beliefs that has clearly weathered

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<sup>65</sup> Key.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

the test of time and scrutiny. Hebrew Israelism represents something that speaks to a void in the African American experience in a genuine way whereby the beliefs that may seem farfetched to the outsider, provide the participant with meaning, membership, and pride.

### **Chapter 3: Ethnography of the True Nation Israelite Congregation**

This chapter provides both an overview and insight into the Hebrew Israelite community called “True Nation Israelite Congregation.” Located on West Florence Avenue in the heart of South Los Angeles, the True Nation Israelite Congregation (TNIC) has physically positioned itself with the intention of making significant outreach efforts in the surrounding community. While the measure of success is difficult to determine, it is clear that the community boasts 10,000 YouTube subscribers, is consistent in the creation of content for their website and social media platforms, and make consistent efforts to be seen and heard publicly. This chapter will explain the various beliefs, philosophies and practices of the TNIC based on information available on their website, interviews with various congregants, and participation in their monthly online questions and answers sessions.

It is important to note the limitations of my research. While I maintained a forthright and detailed account of my intentions in covering this group, throughout my interactions with the group, I sensed that there remained an impenetrable mistrust of outsiders like me. In one conversation, a representative of the congregation informed me that, as the result of various previous interactions with “frustrated [Historical] Jews”, “frustrated Christians”, and “interactions with Federal Bureau of Investigation”, the True Nation Israelite Congregation is careful about whom they deal with regarding interviews and appearances in published works.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

Given these constraints, I believe that my investigation into the True Nation Israelite Congregation has nonetheless produced a worthwhile ethnography.

The True Nation Israelite Congregation website, is full of information about the congregation. The title reads “TRUE NATION ISRAELITE CONGREGATION” in large gold letters on a crimson background with a picture of their congregation’s crest and the names of the 12 Tribes of Israel as the background. Beneath the title of the page is the word “P.O.W.E.R.” written as an acronym for “Plan Organize Work Execute Relax”. Scrolling down, the website lists infographics for various classes, community-building events, social media accounts, and informational videos on several topics. The website is welcoming and designed to garner interest, participation, information from links to articles, blog posts, and information about their beliefs.

The mission statement, in the “About” section at the top of their website, speaks directly to the beliefs, goals, and rationale of Hebrew Israelism. According to the typology of sectarianism matrix provided in chapter 2, this group appears, on the surface, to reject Historical Judaism and accept the Black Church. However, various statements and beliefs seem to challenge the rigidity of this designation. Their mission statement reads:

Our Mission is to teach the knowledge of identity and repentance to the 12 lost tribes of Israel, the so-called Negro, Hispanic, and Native American Indians of Negro and Indian descent scattered throughout the Americas and the four corners of the earth (James





in America are often considered members of the 12 Tribes including but not limited to the Native Americans and various Latino cultures. The mission statement presents militaristic language like armor, tools, ammunition, sharpening in order to “stand strong against...Satan.” There is an air of esotericism in the mission statement as evidenced by the dependence of the community on the dispersion of knowledge via the Elders and teachers of TNIC and the enlightenment through Jesus, and yet the TNIC professes to use science and linguistics to support the various assertions of the group.

In addition to the mission statement, TNIC has provided several articles outlining their beliefs on topics including, but certainly not limited to: “Affliction”, “America is Babylon”, “Dietary Laws”, “Dress Code”, “Head Covering”, “History of the Biblical Writings”, “Homosexuality”, “How to Keep Feast Days at Home”, “Law of the Stranger”, “Law of God”, “Lord’s Chosen”, “Prayer”, “Repentance”, “Ruddy” (referencing the biblical presence of auburn skin tone), “Sinner”, and “The Gentiles”.<sup>75</sup> Each of these articles is written like a brief position paper, citing biblical evidence to support these beliefs and refuting claims that do not. There is no author listed for any article; however, it is clear based on formatting and writing style that there are several people who worked on these articles. There is no date included on any of the articles, so it is not possible to know how often these essays are uploaded, updated, or replaced, but during the course of my research (a six month span) I noticed two new articles had been added to the website. At the bottom of each page of each article is the TNIC website,

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<sup>75</sup> *Break Down PDFs: True Nation Israelite Congregation*. True Nation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2022, from <https://www.truenation.org/blank-page-1>.

the phone number, an email address, and an invitation to call for inquiries regarding the free weekly classes TNIC offers.

The articles are listed in alphabetical order, so there is not a clear hierarchy of their belief structure. How might one organize the group's beliefs in a way that is comprehensive and digestible? First and foremost, it seems, the group believes that they are the lost tribes of Israel. God's true chosen people. They believe that the affliction and suffering of the 12 Tribes is a result of thousands of years of having gone astray from God's law and way. To be clear, according to True Nation Israelite Congregation leadership, Historical Jews are merely "imposters" and a product of the Khazar mass-conversion theory, which is discussed in the final chapter of this thesis. And while conversion does not seem to be possible for people 'outside of Israel' according to Hebrew Israelites, it is important to mention that, in Historical Judaism, conversion is a deeply honored tradition that comes with deeply ethical laws designed to protect those who choose Judaism.

The articles on TNIC's website express a deep belief that Hebrew Israelites "are living in the land that the Bible deemed 'Spiritual Egypt' (Revelation 11:8<sup>76</sup>) which is [their] place of spiritual and physical bondage (Exodus 13:3<sup>77</sup>)", that those worthy of redemption can only come through suffering and affliction, that the end of suffering is to be redeemed and that

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<sup>76</sup> "And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified." (KJV)

<sup>77</sup> "And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place: there shall no leavened bread be eaten." (KJV)

Hebrew Israelites “can only be confirmed as worthy of the kingdom of God through afflictions in the ways of Yahawashai (Jesus)”.<sup>78</sup> While it is not abundantly clear what comparison is being made between the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of Hebrew Israelites, what is clear is the affirmation and experience of suffering as central to the path to redemption.

Following Christ, for the True Nation, is understood to constitute sacrificing who one was before their inclusion into the Congregation. To understand these claims, one has to appreciate the relationship between the True Nation Israelite Congregation and the Law of the Hebrew Bible. The author of the article entitled “Laws of God” presents this understanding of the law:

Christ makes it perfectly clear that he did not destroy or remove the law or prophecies contained in the scriptures. It is written that he came to fulfill the prophecies written of him. His sole purpose was to turn Israel back to the laws of God in order to receive mercy and repentance. For this reason, we need not offer animals for sin offerings any longer as Christ the Messiah was prophesied to be a sacrificial lamb that will take away the sins of Israel offering them repentance.<sup>79</sup>

This quote is a remarkable insight into the way in which the TNIC sees itself relative to the law, the sacrificial cult of the Temple, and Christianity. The adherence to and reverence for the Torah law is, in some ways, similar to the Karaitic Jews who reject the efforts and traditions of Rabbinic Judaism, but different in one significant way. TNIC elders invariably, as my research

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<sup>78</sup> *Affliction*. Affliction: True Nation Israelite Congregation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2022, from [https://www.truenation.org/\\_files/ugd/eac50c\\_9bdb69f6144b431082aa59cd1a8a37d7.pdf](https://www.truenation.org/_files/ugd/eac50c_9bdb69f6144b431082aa59cd1a8a37d7.pdf). Page 2.

<sup>79</sup> *The Laws of God Must be Followed*: True Nation Israelite Congregation. (n.d.). Retrieved January 27, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_1739be1506a24db1ba3fb313b2c037e4.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_1739be1506a24db1ba3fb313b2c037e4.pdf). Page 4.

will show, interpret the law in ways that are both literalist and interpretive according to the understanding of their own elders. Finally, in a unique way, this quote connects the salvation of adherence to Biblical Law with the salvation from sin that the crucifixion has offered Christians for centuries. This belief is highlighted in citing Matthew 19:15-17 which connects the notion of salvation with a life of kept commandments.

In the essay entitled “Dietary Laws,” the author writes about their belief in the benefits of following the law in this life and in the next. The article cites health and cleanliness as immediate benefits of biblical dietary customs. I was not surprised to find extra-biblical rationales for following dietary law as Jews, too, have often recognized that most of the dietary laws seem arbitrary. Two main points are made on the subject of dietary laws and their relationship to health: a) the purpose of dietary laws is to keep people healthy and b) not following dietary laws makes people unhealthy. Instances of high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, obesity, stroke, heart attack and parasite poisoning are thought to be the result of the people not following “Biblical Dietary Laws.” The dirtiness of the proscribed animals is identified as the principal culprit. Both Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are adduced as sources for the prohibition against “pig, shrimp, crab, lobster or catfish” stating that “these animals were created to be scavengers to clean the earth, lakes, rivers, and seas of waste keeping the environment in a pristine and pollution-free condition for the clean animals we are

permitted to eat.”<sup>80</sup> TNIC criticizes historical Christianity and Catholicism for purportedly teaching a “false doctrine” by doing away with the dietary law and laws in general. The author goes on to explicate the direct connection between diet and salvation, saying, “Once we repent and obey the laws, statutes and commandments of YHWH as we did during the time of our first Exodus and receive our kingdom and position of rulership once more as previously mentioned in Isaiah 14:1-3.”<sup>81</sup>

In the essay titled “Affliction”, the title subject is defined as, “distress, tribulation, misery, being restraint [restrained] and pain. For many Hebrew Israelites, TNIC included, the source of this affliction is laid out in Deuteronomy 28. This passage, which offers a series of blessings, curses and admonishments, appears to be *the* central text across the multitude of expressions of Hebrew Israelism. So, too, is the ‘Spiritual Egypt’ of Revelation 11:8 (discussed at the beginning of this chapter), the basis for their belief that America is the prophesied Babylon: the land of affliction, of oppression, and vast physical and spiritual distance from God. The author of “America is Babylon” thus refers to Jeremiah 23:8, in their proclamation that, “Christ is prophesied to redeem us from the “North Country,” that being North America which is the main operating force of the Americas (South and Central will be included in this salvation). All of Israel that repents and reconciles with YHWH will be saved

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<sup>80</sup> *Dietary Laws*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_22aded91522645e19b0f9b09778e2d39.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_22aded91522645e19b0f9b09778e2d39.pdf). Page 1.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid*, 4.

in righteousness from the clutches of Babylon (America), the Great Whore.”<sup>82</sup> The feeling of needing to be redeemed from American oppression, as we saw above, is a common theme in Hebrew Israelism. Thus it is crucial to understand that this idea, for the TNIC, is not metaphor or allegory, but rather a belief that American slavery and the lasting effects of the institutions of slavery are a result of sinful behavior, confirmed by Biblical prophesy. Furthermore, only through repentance and reconciliation with God—that is, by returning to the laws of the Hebrew Bible—is redemption possible.

The TNIC believes, like many Hebrew Israelite groups, that the King James Version of the Bible is the most accurate translation. Taking the time to criticize the Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, the author of the article “Sections of the Bible” asserts that the KJV is painstakingly accurate. Besides the defensive tone in the essay, it is important to note the irony in using the King James Version. King James I is in fact largely responsible for the colonization of the Americas, namely Jamestown, which bears his name. There is also irony that the King James Version of the Bible is highly criticized for its lack of scholarly accuracy; for example, it translates fourteen different Hebrew words to the word “prince” in English.

Almost in anticipation of this critique, the TNIC author writes that “it is the unbelievers and the evil-doers, [who] lack the true knowledge of the Bible, that claim the Bible contains contradictions and vehemently slander its writings for the sole purpose of deterring the true

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<sup>82</sup> *America is Babylon and the North Country*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_0cb037b0c3d640158d180d9bbb2235ae.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_0cb037b0c3d640158d180d9bbb2235ae.pdf). Page 3.

followers from the word of YHWH.”<sup>83</sup> In an interview with a representative from the TNIC, I asked specifically how he felt using the version of the Bible commissioned by the same person who would bring the first slave to Jamestown. While the subject did not indicate that he was offended, I could tell that he took his time with his answer. He responded to the question by saying, “even taking into account the awful things King James did, we take into account the good things, too.”<sup>84</sup> While TNIC seems to be unaware that the King James Version was sponsored by King James I, their articles praise King James for the inclusion of what the TNIC calls “apocryphal texts”<sup>85</sup> and the destruction of documents that contained “errors” determined by King James to be “deliberately misleading.”

The Bible is used throughout these articles as proof-text of nearly every statement. Throughout their videos, in which they engage with people on the street in debate or conversation, the TNIC teachers refer to the text, cite the text, and encourage those expressing their opinions to cite text. TNIC members seem to immediately reject any personal opinion or sentiment that is not textually supported, in spite of several instances during lectures where outside sources (often less than reputable ones) are used in an essential way to prove particular points. The text of the Bible, however, seems to be the bedrock upon which TNIC sits. Every statement points back to scriptural support. The text provides the law, the sense of purpose,

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<sup>83</sup> *America is Babylon and the North Country*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_0cb037b0c3d640158d180d9bbb2235ae.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_0cb037b0c3d640158d180d9bbb2235ae.pdf). Page 5.

<sup>84</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

<sup>85</sup> TNIC defines Apocryphal texts as the history of the Kings of Israel, the Books of Wisdom, and the Writings of the Prophets from Joshua to Malachi.

and as stated previously, the proof in confirming their world view. Most illuminating are the articles describing TNIC's biblical relationship with the laws. In large part, their interpretation of the law is literal, in a sense similar to the Karaites who also reject rabbinic Judaism. The TNIC also included articles regarding laws, but are not necessarily comprehensive in the explanation of how these laws are practiced. This being said, TNIC does provide a strong baseline for understanding their relationship with the law.

With regard to dress and dress code, the article tells says, "When compliant with commandments, Israel will become 'a wise and understanding people.'"<sup>86</sup> The True Nation congregation makes the assertion that the "inborn sense of fashion and coordination of dress and style that surpasses all other nations" is evidence of the fact that African Americans are the Children of Israel. This sentiment is steeped in the Black Pride philosophy.<sup>87</sup> The TNIC's intention behind the original statement regarding black style and Simone's disposition regarding Black Pride are in parallel if not in unison.<sup>88</sup> The TNIC article seems frustrated with

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<sup>86</sup> *Dress Code of the Israelites*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf). Page 1.

<sup>87</sup> To this day we see discourse whereby African American or Black pride is compared to the racism inherent of White Pride, or more accurately labeled White Supremacy, yet these two ideologies are not to be compared. White Supremacy seeks to maintain that one race, the white race, is superior to all peoples of color, whereas Black Pride is akin to a reclamation of externally imposed identity. Nina Simone, once said in an interview that, "To me, we are the most beautiful creatures in the world—black people. So, my job is to make them more curious about where they came from and their own identity and pride in that identity." She went on to say that, "This is what compels me to push black people. To identify with black culture: giving out to them that Black-Ness; that Black-Power." Black Pride, in this way, is a mantra to remind the African American that, in spite of all of the experiences that tell them otherwise, they are beautiful, that they matter and that they are worthy of a sense of pride in themselves.

<sup>88</sup> "Colin in Black and White." Season 1, Episode 5. -02:31



African American culture: “Our men have discarded their fringes and royal ribband of blue for sagging pants, excessive baggy clothing and feminine clothing while our women have traded their beautiful modest clothing for skimpy whorish apparel that is not acceptable to YHWH.”<sup>89</sup> The underlying message of this seems to be something like: “take pride in your appearance and take ownership of yourself so that you might serve God and your community.” In response, and in its prototypical compliance with scripture, TNIC demands that women dress modestly, defined as covering skin below the naval until the thigh, citing Exodus 28:42.<sup>90</sup> Several photos are provided as examples in the article where women are seen wearing long dresses or skirts with fringes attached to the hem.<sup>91</sup> In contrast, several examples of immodesty are provided on the website including several surprising pictures of scantily clad women. Men, as shown through several images of acceptable clothing, are to wear fringed garments with a blue ribband.

The views regarding gender and sexuality are, perhaps as expected, very conservative. Leadership in TNIC enforce strict gender roles and norms. Men and women are defined strictly by their genitalia and gender is considered “binary”. While the issue of “cross-dressing” is discussed in the section pertaining to clothing, I believe it is more appropriately

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<sup>89</sup> *Dress Code of the Israelites*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf). Page 3.

<sup>90</sup> “And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; from the loins even unto the thighs they shall reach:” (KJV)

<sup>91</sup> *Dress Code of the Israelites*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf). Page 6.

juxtaposed with TNIC's beliefs regarding gender and sexuality. The True Nation Israelite Congregation maintains that, according to Deuteronomy 22:5<sup>92</sup>, "women dress[ing] as men and men dress[ing] as women" are deemed an abomination declaring: "Pants are made for men."<sup>93</sup>

In describing the patriarchal hierarchy, TNIC cites I Corinthians 11, a chapter that defines gender hierarchy, regarding when one should or should not wear a head-cover, and what one should do without a head-cover. According to the essay, uncovering one's head while praying or prophesying reveals one's true connection to Christ. The True Nation Congregation believes that the Head of Jesus is God, that the head of Man is Jesus, and that the head of woman is man.<sup>94</sup> This imagery is intended to prove or explain the inherent hierarchy of gender whereby, "a woman has the same responsibility to honor her Husband/Man as does a man who must honor Christ. When a woman goes against the teachings of her Husband (the laws, statutes, and commandments) she has 'uncovered' or exposed herself and her Husband as being out of order."<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, according to TNIC, it is the duty of the man to teach his

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<sup>92</sup> "The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God." (KJV)

<sup>93</sup> *Dress Code of the Israelites*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf). Page 5.

<sup>94</sup> I Corinthians 11. (KJV)

<sup>95</sup> *Dress Code of the Israelites*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_6c13ad71e90948978038a9796f4b5ffe.pdf). Page 3.

wife the ways of the Bible. If she is not married, the author continues, she must be instructed by learned men in the ways of scripture.

While the Bible as a proof text for homophobia, transphobia, and so-called traditional gender norms is nothing new, the way in which gender and sexuality is discussed within the TNIC group speaks to a historical and persistent discomfort within African American communities. On this very topic, Rob Smith writes that “the hyper-masculine ideals forced upon young black boys combine with the homophobia of the black church to create a perfect storm of shame and secrecy.”<sup>96</sup> This apparent overlap and remnant of the Black Church is helpful in tracing a common philosophy and understanding of the ways in which Hebrew Israelism comes out of an expression of African American Identity as well as an expression of the discomfort with progressive understandings of gender.

The TNIC devotes an entire article to the “Law of the Stranger,” in which the leadership argues that only Israelites are afforded salvation. The argument begins with the notion that adherence to the law is the source of salvation and that one law was given to the mixed multitudes (Israelites and “strangers”) when leaving Egypt, citing Exodus 12:49, which the King James Version reads, “One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you.” The TNIC position, however, argues that even the stranger who latches on to Israel in order to be alleviated from bondage and also adheres to the law is not afforded a share in salvation. The essay cites Psalms 54:3, which, in the King James

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<sup>96</sup> [https://www.salon.com/2013/04/30/jason\\_collins\\_black\\_and\\_gay\\_like\\_me/](https://www.salon.com/2013/04/30/jason_collins_black_and_gay_like_me/)

Version reads, “For strangers are risen up against me, and oppressors seek after my soul: they have not set God before them. Selah.” The stranger cannot take a share in redemption because of Israel’s subjugated status by the strangers of the world.<sup>97</sup>

The original Hebrew, it should be said, does not support their exegesis. In Psalms 54:5 in the Masoretic Text, the word used by the Psalmist to denote “stranger” is “זָרִים (*zarim*)” as opposed to the stranger of Exodus 12:49 (12:50 in the Masoretic Text). In Exodus 12:49, the word for “stranger” is the word “גֵּר (*geir*).” To provide a brief example of the semantic range of the two words, “*zarim*” is related to the phrase “*Avodah Zarah*” which means idol worship or the worship of things foreign to the Israelite religion. Other examples include Deuteronomy 32:16 where God is frustrated by sacrifices made to foreign Gods or in Leviticus 10:1 where Nadav and Abihu offer “*eish zarah*” or “alien fire” on God’s altar culminating in their death. Conversely, the word “*geir*” refers to a protected class of people living within the Israelite community. For example, Exodus 23:9 famously reads, “You shall not oppress a stranger (*geir*), for you know the feelings of the stranger (*geir*), having yourselves been strangers (*geirim*) in the land of Egypt.” Interestingly enough, Jeremiah 7:5-7 takes the opposite approach admonishing against the oppression of the stranger (*geir*) as the only way to retain possession of the land of Israel.

This exegetical issue aside, the assertion of chosen-ness permeates several of the essays on the True Nation Israelite Congregation’s website and is guided by the belief that, according

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<sup>97</sup> KJV Psalms 54:3

to Nehemiah 9:2 and II Corinthians 6:17, “Israel was commanded to be separate.” These separatist beliefs for the basis for the belief that any other religions, “especially religious movements such as Christianity, Nation of Islam, Egyptology, Rastafarianism, and the like” that do not explicitly follow the laws of the Hebrew Bible are “distractions.” This disposition does two things. It separates the TNIC from these other expressions of diasporic identity, and it distinguishes themselves as the one true tradition. I believe that the core of the True Nation Israelite Congregation is the intent to facilitate the “realization of [Israel’s] true history.”<sup>98</sup> For the TNIC, pride, social mobilization, and self-realization are guiding ideas.

Two particular quotes from the essay “Lord’s Chosen” highlight this notion. The first, “we have brought upon ourselves the curse of physical and mental bondage” seems to reference Garvey’s understanding of mental slavery while simultaneously explaining 400 years of slavery as the dereliction of their commanded duties.<sup>99</sup> The second quote reads, “...our people have fallen, Blacks and Latinos prefer to be at the bottom of the social, racial, and economical totem pole.”<sup>100</sup> This disturbing analysis of the shortcomings of race relations in America is steeped in empowerment beyond black pride. The nationalist identity inherent in the “Lord’s Chosen” essay seeks to shift the self-perspective of Black, Latino and Native Americans such that they see themselves not as a negative stereotype. Rather, the article

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<sup>98</sup> “ISRAEL” YHWH’S CHOSEN NATION. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_e8f2fe89d39c41cb95f8c26db3897762.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_e8f2fe89d39c41cb95f8c26db3897762.pdf). Page 1.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

suggests, they should see themselves as the true Nation of Israel, God's Chosen People and, that through action upon this realization, their circumstances will shift toward redemption.

In my first conversation with a member of the True Nation Israelite Congregation, I asked what he believes the congregation is doing well. He explained that people come to TNIC to try and better themselves, to find community and that the community is, "doing its best to provide spiritual growth in our time and in its seasons. Sometime there are times of plenty, sometimes things are dry. Like the seasons, there are ups and downs."<sup>101</sup> I wondered aloud to what extent he believes that those who participate in the TNIC adhere strictly to the laws and if there is any sense of orthodoxy in practice. He said that there are "varying levels of commitment as there are in any faith...it varies from camp to camp and individual to individual. There are people who are more adherent and there are those who come for the learning, the community or the worship."<sup>102</sup>

The ritual life of the True Nation Israelite Congregation is, according to their website, centrally important. There are several articles and essays that speak to the congregation's spiritual priorities regarding prayer, repentance, sin, holidays, and rituals providing a clear belief in the importance and power of prayer, as well as the way in which prayer might be effective. The articles and essays that describe the holidays and festivals are interesting, especially, because of the rejection of the rabbinic tradition. Within those articles are descriptions of how, when, and why these appointed holidays and festivals are celebrated.

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<sup>101</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*

The essay on prayer provides several biblical examples of effective, acceptable paradigms for prayer, but there does not appear to be a set liturgy of any kind. What appears to be important is intention and physicality. Prayer should be for the sake of prayer as opposed to for the purpose of being seen or to appear pious and with the purposes expressed in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-13). One's thoughts ought to be pure and succinct because "YHWH doesn't take kindly to vain babbling and incoherent thoughts."<sup>103</sup> Ironically and notably, the story of Hannah praying for a child, whose prayer was presumed by Eli to be the incoherent ramblings of a drunkard, in I Samuel 1:13, is absent from this conversation about effective prayer. Similarly to Judaism, "since we no longer offer sacrifices to YHWH our prayers now are good and acceptable sacrifices."<sup>104</sup> Hosea 14:2 is cited as the prooftext whereby prayers are rendered the "calves of our lips."

There are also a few suggestions regarding the physical performance of prayer. The essay argues that prayer should be directed toward Jerusalem, upon one's knees, and that the one praying should raise and spread their hands with, "palms facing up" as a sign of humility and reverence citing Zechariah 1:17, Daniel 6:10, and Psalms 55:17. The essay goes on to say that praying three times a day, like Daniel or David, is, "[not] mandatory, however...is

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<sup>103</sup> *Prayer*. (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_11af6a73d49f413dbcd4a7856fbc8a75.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_11af6a73d49f413dbcd4a7856fbc8a75.pdf). Page 2.

<sup>104</sup> *ibid*.

wisdom.”<sup>105</sup> The essay goes on to clarify that these are goals to work towards, acknowledging that there is a disposition towards progress.

In one interview with a TNIC Leader, I asked how he might interpret the requirement to “bind these words upon one’s hand and that they should be a symbol between one’s eyes” referring specifically to the texts of Exodus 13:9 and Deuteronomy 6:8. Where the Rabbinic tradition of Historical Jews has come to understand these verses to refer to phylacteries, the True Nation Israelite Congregation leadership maintains that the words are largely symbolic stating, “hands is what you use to do things. It should be in your action. Forehead...it should be in your mind. Metaphorical.” When asked further about the instructions to “inscribe these words upon the doorposts of your house,” from Deuteronomy 6:9 the interviewee informed me that members often use a website where you can “type in the words that you want...and put them as stickers on their doorposts.”<sup>106</sup>

The TNIC celebrates New Moons, the Sabbath, and feasts such as Passover, Second Passover, Memorial of Simon, Pentecost, the Memorial of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles, Feast of Dedication, Destruction of Nicanor, Purim. For Historical Jews, the Pentecost is Shavuot, the Memorial of Trumpets is Rosh Hashanah, Tabernacles is Sukkot, and the Feast of Dedication is Hanukkah. The observance of the Sabbath is an interesting and curious case for several reasons. For one, as a Jewish author, I found myself wondering how we as Jews came to recognize this week (Monday-Friday) as *the* week. The week exists with

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<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.



no corresponding astronomical phenomenon where the rotation of the earth marks the days, the orbit of the moon marks the months and the orbit of the earth marks the years.

While Judaism often receives credit for the invention or implementation of the week, most critical sources give credit to ancient Mesopotamian civilizations like the Babylonians, who are also credited with our time-keeping system. Regardless, it is interesting that the notion of the timing of the Sabbath goes unquestioned in TNIC literature and discussions. The practice of the Sabbath for the TNIC is a day of learning, worship, and community where restrictions of not working do not resemble the 39 prohibited acts of work defined by the Mishnah. Rather the prohibitions against working are taken literally from Biblical scripture and no further interpretation is pursued. The Sabbath is used as a general term, much like in the Hebrew Scriptures, to describe any day where work is divinely prohibited.

According to the TNIC website, “all dates are calculated by the Calendar Council and are finalized upon observation of the moon by our New Moon Spotters in the mouth of two or three witness[es].”<sup>107</sup> More specifically, after talking with a member of the TNIC community, the TNIC “New Moon Spotters” use programs like Quick Phase Pro 4, NASA, [and the] farmers almanac.”<sup>108</sup> Quick Phase Pro, according to its website is a, “beautiful, powerful moon software for moon lovers or anyone...interested in predicting, researching or tracking the

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<sup>107</sup> *David is Ruddy. Esau is Red.* (n.d.). Retrieved January 28, 2022, from [https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c\\_452511646fd448059d3fc9ff9da9a0d0.pdf](https://efe44dba-8d64-4f5e-8267-3f8347aab3c9.filesusr.com/ugd/eac50c_452511646fd448059d3fc9ff9da9a0d0.pdf). Page 5.

<sup>108</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

moon for any reason.”<sup>109</sup> While this is helpful in determining the waxing and the waning of the moon, what was not readily clear was how they determined which moon is the first moon in the lunar cycle, thus setting their yearly calendar.

Fortunately, a video was readily available on their YouTube channel describing the philosophy and process by which they determined which moon corresponded with which month. What I found particularly interesting was the fact that, even though they do not claim the Babylonian Talmud (or the Jerusalem Talmud for that matter) as part of their history, there is an equal dedication to accurately dating feasts and festivals. This is particularly interesting because they have devised a method of dating, *in spite of* the absence of the rabbinic tradition. The YouTube video makes several claims about the reasons why Hebrew Israelites apparently lost touch with their calendar. It cites Daniel 7:22-25 which asserts that the role of the “fourth beast”—which TNIC leadership interprets as Esau, or Rome—is to, “change times and laws.”

In order to determine the first month of the year, Abib (the TNIC pronunciation of the biblical month Aviv, which Historical Jews call by Babylonian name Nisan), TNIC Leadership look to Josephus in connecting the month of Aviv to the astrological sign of Aries and to the Seleucid Syrian’s 6th month of Xanthicus (which according to TNIC corresponds with the month of Nisan) explaining that “sometimes you have to go outside scriptures to understand the scripture.”<sup>110</sup> While there is certainly truth in this statement, it does come in conflict with

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<sup>109</sup> <https://www.quickphase.com/>

<sup>110</sup> (2021). *Calculating Our Calendar*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5HWOnQkJGA>.

much of the TNIC statements and there does not appear to be a discernible method for determining what outside the Bible constitutes credible source material.

Once the TNIC have determined the calendar, the dates of the holidays and festivals follow the dates prescribed in the Bible. Compared to Rabbinic Judaism, which suggests that an extra day of observance precedes the prescribed date to ensure Halakhic accordance, the TNIC dates align with the dates of holidays that Historical Jews would practice if living in Israel. The Passover Feast or the Feast of Unleavened Bread, according to the TNIC, requires the purchase and consumption of a lamb (with the caveat that if a full lamb cannot be purchased, adherents should purchase and eat lamb shoulders). The lamb, in compliance with biblical law, must be cooked over an open flame, be eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. According to the website, bitter herbs might include such plants as, “parsley, horseradish, cascara sagrada, mustard leaf.”<sup>111</sup> According to the website the, “easiest unleavened bread to acquire is Matzos.” I would be remised if I did not point out the unexplained use of Ashkenazic spelling of the Hebrew word for Matzot (plural of Matzah). There is of course the irony in that TNIC rejects Historical Jewish claim to these traditions and yet there are moments, like this, where the dependence on Historical Judaism is apparent.

Wine appears to be a perfectly acceptable way of celebrating and elevating these various feast days, in spite of the fact that wine is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as being required. Regarding the Day of Atonement, the TNIC Leadership provides caution and proper

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<sup>111</sup> YATAB144. (2021, May 17). *Passover*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.truenation.org/post/passover>.

prior preparedness for fasting, saying, “We advise if you are not acquainted with fasting to minimize your food intake several days prior to the Day of Atonement to allow your body to adjust and the fasting will not be so difficult. Do know that this is an affliction of the soul so this day is not to be comfortable in this regard as it is a day for purging out sin.”<sup>112</sup> Fasting on Yom Kippur, which I had always considered to be a rabbinic interpretation of several texts, brought me to wonder how the TNIC Leadership came to determine that a Day of Self-Affliction, prescribed in the Hebrew Bible, would come to mean a day of fasts. Interestingly enough, according to my interview with a TNIC leader, the same proof texts that the rabbis provided in the Talmud are the proof texts provided by the True Nation Israelite Congregation.<sup>113</sup>

The Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), in practice, incorporates scriptures dealing with tabernacles which are translated as “tents”. This, however, is interesting in that Ohel is often the word used for tent and Sukkah is often translated as shelter or booth. The TNIC state that during the 8 days of the Feast of Tabernacles, “we are required to dwell in tents (booths) as our forefathers did in the wilderness after Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.”<sup>114</sup> Adherents are encouraged to “make small tents out of blankets, sticks poles etc... or purchase a small tent for your family and set it/them up in your back yard, camping ground, living room or safe

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<sup>112</sup> YATAB144. (2021, May 17). *Day of Atonement*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.truenation.org/post/day-of-atonement>

<sup>113</sup> Weisman, B., & Tob. (2021, December 29). Hebrew Israelite Interview. personal.

<sup>114</sup> YATAB144. (2021, May 17). *Feast of Tabernacles*. Retrieved January 28, 2022, from <https://www.truenation.org/post/feast-of-tabernacles>

area.”<sup>115</sup> While it is not clear to what extent members participate in this practice, the use of pre-built camping tents provides ample opportunities for families to have a unique experience with nature, far from the norm of everyday life. The Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah), has no ritual prescribed aside from reading scripture

There are, in addition to the feast days that parallel Historical Jewish practice, two feast days that do not appear in the Hebrew Bible listed among the holidays celebrated.<sup>116</sup> The Destruction of Nicanor, which occurs on the 13th day of the 12th month and the Memorial of Simon, which occurs on the 23rd day of the 2nd month. The Destruction of Nicanor celebrates the demise of the Seleucid general with whom the Maccabees fought. His name, in the II Maccabees is associated with the celebration of Purim. The second festival is the Memorial of Simon which refers to the Hasmonean prince, high priest, and Maccabean brother. Both of these days deal directly with the story of the Maccabees and, based on inference alone, may well speak to the priorities of the True Nation Israelite Congregation in a similar way that the Maccabees represent a heroic presence for certain Historical Jews who see the story of the Maccabees through the lens of nationalistic pride.

The True Nation Israelite Congregation is a community of “so-called-African Americans”<sup>117</sup> who, in their heart of hearts, believe that they are the descendants of the

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<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> A discrepancy explained as a result of their using the apocryphal texts included in the KJV of the Bible as opposed to the Masoretic Text.

<sup>117</sup> “so-called-African Americans” is in quotations because TNIC believes that African American is an externally imposed name that has no historical relevance regarding the realization that they are the nation of Israel.

Ancient Israelites; dispersed and lost to assimilation for hundreds of years, intentionally stolen from West Africa and enslaved in the Americas for hundreds of years. Central to this idea is the text of Deuteronomy 28 which speaks at lengths about the blessings and curses of those who follow the law or reject the law, respectively. They are an exclusive group, secretive in the sense that only members are welcome. There is a deep concern with how they will be received by the outside world and yet there is a strong presence in the communities in which they preach. Their lessons and viewership often have hundreds and sometimes thousands of views on YouTube and other social media platforms. It is clear that they are dedicated to serving their community and giving those with whom they find kinship, the opportunity to find membership and community.

## Chapter 4: Ethnography of Israel United In Christ

A properly conducted comparative study ought to provide an ethnography of at least two communities. The second community I looked at is Israel United In Christ. This group is much larger and much more widespread than the True Nation Israelite Congregation. This chapter compares and contrasts these two distinct communities highlighting areas of overlap and differences. As in the previous chapter, the intention of the present ethnography is to provide an insightful overview of the philosophy, hierarchy, theology, and religious expression of a Black Hebrew Israelite community.

IUIC, as Israel United In Christ members call themselves, do not have “churches”; rather, they franchise and maintain “schools” throughout the world. Similarly to the True Nation Israelite Congregation, their website provides a substantial amount of information, which provides most of the information in this chapter. A visitor to their website first sees the seal of Israel United In Christ, emblazoned by an eruption of flames, which is followed by a slideshow.<sup>118</sup> The first image to appear in the slide show is the founder of IUIC, known as Bishop Nathanyel. The rest of the slideshow portrays members marching, praying, learning, training, and distributing informational pamphlets to the public. The pictures show members wearing purple robes or shirts with gold trim and gold lettering. In addition to this slideshow and a menu for the rest of the website, the homepage also serves as the live-stream location.

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<sup>118</sup> <https://israelunite.org/>

Thus, any live-streamed broadcasts are among the first thing a site visitor sees upon arrival to the IUIIC website.

At the bottom of the homepage, one finds links for class schedules, prayer requests, community outreach efforts, membership invitations, a link to subscribe to the newsletter, and the option to request founder Bishop Nathanyel to speak. There is also a telling disclaimer:

Israel United in Christ is not affiliated with any other Israelite organization or Group! Israel United In Christ is a non-violent bible based movement! We Don't advocate or condone any acts of violence against any race, ethnicity or gender! We advise that if anyone hears or knows of any plots or knows of any plots to cause harm to anyone or to break the laws of the land, you must contact the proper authorities to bring awareness to any possible threat(s), as stated in Leviticus 5:1.<sup>119120</sup>

This statement is telling in that it displays a clear awareness of the negative public opinion regarding Black Hebrew Israelite movements and the need to distance themselves from more militant or even violent iterations of the Hebrew Israelite Movement. Efforts to distinguish themselves from other Hebrew Israelite communities permeate their literature and their video recordings. They routinely emphasize that their path is one that, “has the most order.”<sup>121</sup> Having said that, there is no attempt to downplay or conceal their beliefs which are prominently displayed on the various pages on the website, the videos on their YouTube channel, their social media presence, and their mission statement which reads, “Israel United

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<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Leviticus 5:1 KJV “And if a soul sin, and hear the voice of swearing, and is a witness, whether he hath seen or known of it; if he do not utter it, then he shall bear his iniquity.”

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBb0gae7Pxs&t=10919s>. (2020). *Passover Special 2020 | Us Against Them*. Retrieved February 1, 2022.



In Christ is dedicated to waking up the 144,000 elect men from the lost 12 tribes of Israel, also known as the Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans.”<sup>122</sup>

According to the group’s history published on IUIC’s website, Bishop Nathanyel founded Israel United in Christ while living in Coney Island, New York. At some unspecified time, Nathanyel moved upstate and began recording “biblically based educational videos” out of his basement, teaching his understanding of scripture. His home became a meeting house that soon outgrew its capacity, so he rented a basement in Brooklyn and opened Israel United in Christ’s first “school,” as they are called. The Bishop is viewed as a revolutionary leader whose ability to rally people together has enabled tremendous global growth since the group’s inception. While he is not called a prophet, it is clear that his “interpretive word” is revered by the group as, “God’s vision, which is the resurrection of the Children of Israel, the waking up of the 12 Tribes. To bring their heritage and identity back to remembrance, back to the laws of God and rebuilt the nation of Israel according to Bible prophecy.”

In terms of organizational structure, Bishop Nathanyel ben Israel (otherwise known as Nathaniel Ray) is the leader and he keeps a council of deacons who teach, advise, and guide the group’s trajectory. While the flagship community remains in New York City, IUIC maintains 72 “schools” throughout the United States of America. The members of these various schools are called “Soldiers of God”. Only 12 states don’t have at least one

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<sup>122</sup> Israel United In Christ. (n.d.). *About*. Israel United In Christ. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://israelunite.org/about-iuic-3/>.

“school.”<sup>123</sup> “Visitors”, which is to say non-members, are invited to, “learn what the Most High and Christ expect of you as an Israelite and follower of Christ.” Visitors are asked by the website if they, “have what it takes to be a part of history in the making?” For those “visitors” seeking membership, community, and perhaps solutions to their current circumstances this open-ended challenge, encouraging the individual to become part of something bigger and more powerful than themselves.

Members of IUIIC are required to do four things: to engage in “Self Examination”, “S.P.A.” (an acronym meaning Study, Pray, Apply), to congregate, and to give alms. Self-Examination, according to IUIIC Leadership, is a daily reflection on one’s “current state mentally, emotionally, spiritually and financially.” The expressed goal of this self-examination is spiritual transformation, even rebirth as the language used refers to the “killing off” of one’s old self. Study, Pray, Apply is a mnemonic device created by Bishop Nethanyel designed to encourage members to read four chapters of the King James Bible daily such that, “when you come against trials you will understand where they are coming from and how to overcome them.” Nowhere is it explained how reading the King James Bible helps in such a way, but there is a clear belief that this is the path toward making meaning out of life’s tribulations. The admonishment to congregate is a directive out of the need to create and maintain community. The congregation is referred to as “the body,” which takes language from the ecclesiastical church of the New Testament, but also implies a sense of unity that is derived. Finally, the

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

giving of alms is required of membership, however the website does not indicate in what amount.

Men are encouraged to participate in the “Mighty Men of Valor” group and women are encouraged to participate in “Daughters of Sarah” group. These groups encourage men to “lead and build a nation starting with their families...[by practicing] scriptural, mental, physical, and spiritual strengthening” with the expressed goal of, “[restoring] Black, Hispanic, and Native American Families, one man at a time.” The “Daughters of Sarah” has an entirely separate website dedicated to their practice and beliefs with an expressed goal of, “[ensuring] that our sisters can feel like they are able to contribute to this truth and also have a place to be exhorted, edified and inspired...to be better sisters, mothers, daughters, wives and friends in our righteous walk.” The website lists ideas for dates, successful marriage, and how to raise children from birth to college. The site takes a stance on fashion, beauty, health, modest living and defining, at length, what constitutes modest dress. There is an archive of the Hebrew Israelite Women’s magazine, “Peculiar People” which provides literature for Hebrew Israelite women seeking to delve further into the aspects of the community’s culture like fashion, cooking, literature, and art. Articles are written in both English and Spanish, to encourage a diverse readership. The site provides activities, articles, and videos about the IUIC’s holidays and celebrations and there is a social element to the website with message boards that resemble Facebook and other forms of social media.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Home • The Daughters of Sarah*. The Daughters of Sarah. (2022, January 27). Retrieved January 23, 2022, from <https://thedaughtersofSarah.com/>.

Three principal beliefs make up IUIC's expression of Hebrew Israelism: the belief that the 12 Tribes of Israel are nations that are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); the belief in IUIC's status as God's chosen people; and the belief that Jesus is the Messiah and will return to redeem Israel. These beliefs inform their rituals, practices, approaches to outreach. Regarding the tribes of the Southern Kingdom, IUIC maintains that American Blacks are the tribe of Judah, citing Genesis 49:8, "Thy hand shall be in the neck of thine enemies," which is interpreted as IUIC's responsibility to reveal the truth and unmask the identity of the oppressors. Jamaicans, according to IUIC, are the tribe of Benjamin on account of their "rebellious nature during slavery." Levi is said to be made up of Haitians, according to IUIC, as evidenced by the apparent Haitian affinity for witchcraft.

For the tribes of the Northern Kingdom, Ephraim is identified as Puerto Ricans. And while archaeology and anthropology proves that the Taino peoples who make up the indigenous population of Puerto Rico came via canoe from the Yucatan peninsula, IUIC insists that the name "Boriqua" is "actually a Hebrew term which originated from the real Jews. The term Boricua means 'brave' in Hebrew. The term 'Borinquen' is a Hebrew word which means 'Land of the Brave Lords'. Why Hebrew? Because Hebrew was the original language spoken on the island prior to the invasion of the Spanish Conquistadors."<sup>125</sup> Manasseh are the Cubans and, according to IUIC, were brought to Cuba during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to fulfill the curse of Deuteronomy 28. Simeon resides in the Dominican Republic and the same context

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<sup>125</sup> Israel United In Christ. (n.d.). *About*. Israel United In Christ. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://israelunite.org/about-iuic-3/>.

is given for Simeon as it is for Levi. This connection between these two tribes is supported by text, however Genesis 49 is quite clear about the connection between and reason for distance from Simeon and Levi regarding the mass killing of the men of Shechem in Genesis 34.

Zebulun are apparently the Mayans, Gad are Native Americans, and Reuben are the Seminole and Muskogee Tribes. Asher are the Incan peoples, who IUIC claims were, “included in the ‘ten tribes of Israel’ migration to the Americas during the Persian captivity around 536 BC according to the book of 2 Esdras 13:40-45.” IUIC also claims, without etymological evidence, that Brazil is rooted in the Hebrew word “ברזל *Barzel*” which means iron. Issachar, which IUIC claims are Mexicans and Aztecs, are compared to Issachar’s reputation for being a “strong couching ass (donkey).”<sup>126</sup> The essay about the connection between Issachar and Mexicans/the Aztecs concludes by purporting that, “It is no coincidence that the symbol of the ‘burro’ (Spanish for Donkey) has always been known to represent Mexico’s trademark.” This is odd and ironic considering that Donkeys were first brought to Mexico in 1528 by the Spanish colonialists. Naphtali are, because of the cardinal directions listed in Genesis 49 pertaining to Naphtali, the Chileans. Finally, Dan are those who have been lost and dispersed throughout the world.

Why are these 12 groups considered to be the 12 tribes? What ties these 12 groups together? Based on what is written about each group on their website, IUIC sees these groups as oppressed and, furthermore, sharing the same oppressor: White, European Colonialism.

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<sup>126</sup> Genesis 49:14 KJV.

While many of the beliefs espoused by IUIC about these various nationalities and ethnicities and their connection to the 12 tribes are either impossible, misrepresentations or anachronisms, religion is not historically averse to making outlandish, impossible claims in the name of faith or belief. Furthermore, I believe these espoused beliefs serve a fundamental and perhaps noble purpose for their movement. This particular belief seems to be in line with the beliefs espoused by some Liberation Theology movements.

Liberation theology is, simply put, a religious movement in Central and South America that sought to aid and liberate those experiencing social and economic oppression. These movements are often characterized by social change, modesty, and communitarianism. According to the Anti-Defamation League's research, the mission of Israel United In Christ is, "to spread the Black Hebrew Israelite ideology and to educate black individuals of their true place in society."<sup>127</sup> The ADL description continues describing a commitment to dispersing this ideology throughout the world to as many people of color as possible. Liberation theology, coupled with an evangelist urge paints a fuller picture of the motivating factors by which IUIC operates.

The IUIC's religious practices are similar to those of the True Nation Israelite Congregation. They celebrate the Sabbath by not working. They observe the "Memorial of Blowing of Trumpets" (*Rosh Hashanah*), and spend seven days in the wilderness with their

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<sup>127</sup> AntiDefamation League. (n.d.). *Black Hebrew Israelites*. ADL Fighting Hate for Good. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjhsLe7y7r1AhWMJUQIHtaOADEQFn\\_oECAIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.adl.org%2Fnode%2F14842%2Fresource-pdf&usg=AOvVaw0tYIPc8eGd5nQdSmvNJygf](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjhsLe7y7r1AhWMJUQIHtaOADEQFn_oECAIQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.adl.org%2Fnode%2F14842%2Fresource-pdf&usg=AOvVaw0tYIPc8eGd5nQdSmvNJygf).

community during the Feast of Tabernacles. “The Feast of Dedication” (aka Hanukkah), The Destruction of Nicanor, and the Day of Simeon celebrate heroic battles against apostasy. The image of the Maccabee as warrior seems to represent the ideal Hebrew Israelite, willing to fight “in righteousness” against those who would stand in IUIC’s way.<sup>128</sup>

They observe the Day of Atonement with fasting, exempting “anyone with an illness, on medication, or...underage children.” They read the book of Jonah, citing Acts 27:9 as their rationale. Regarding Passover, they acknowledge the sacrifices required during the time of the Temple in Jerusalem, “Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of his people, and therefore, there would be no condemnation without sacrifice because of Him.” In this same vein, IUIC purports that, as a result of false doctrines and teachings, Christianity has historically done away with the law which, IUIC paraphrases Paul saying that, “ONLY the Levitical laws of animal sacrifice were done away with.”<sup>129</sup> Purim is celebrated with gift-giving based on Esther 9:19 in the KJV which reads, “Therefore the Jews of the villages, that dwelt in the unwalled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions one to another.” The Feast of First Fruits/Pentecost (Shavuot for Historical Judaism) is celebrated as a “solemn sabbath for the Most High God,” but no context is given regarding the agrarian connection with this holiday.

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<sup>128</sup> Israel United In Christ. (n.d.). *About*. Israel United In Christ. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://israelunite.org/about-iuic-3/>.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*.

One particular belief that sets IUIC apart not only from the True Nation Israelite congregation but from the rest of the world is their observance of the New Moon. IUIC has reinterpreted the definition of “new moon” and have declared that the New Moon is actually when the moon is full. This change is a very recent one. I first came across this reality when I was comparing the dates of their festivals with the Historical Jewish dates and noticed that the dates were consistently around 15 days apart, a peculiar phenomenon seeing as the True Nation Israelite Congregation’s festival dates matched entirely with the Historical Jewish dates. After some digging, I was able to find a video explaining the decision to redefine what is meant by new moon and the process by which the decision was made. At some point in 2021, a deacon found himself reading scripture and noticed that Genesis 1:14-16 refers to the moon as a light, “that shall serve as signs for the set times—the days and years...and...to dominate the night.” The deacon proceeds to point out that the moon is created as a light and, presumably, the day the moon was created would also be the first day of the month. From here, the deacon asks why the month begins when there is no moon saying, “how can it be a new moon if there is no moon,” quipping, “Can’t see the moon? I guess it’s a new moon?” In response to this question, the bishop convened a council of deacons and it was discussed over the course of 8 months and they determined that Esau, institutional Christianity, had been deceiving them and that the new moon actually begins when the moon is full. While the new moon celebration is during the full moon, most other feast days occur on the 15th and will enjoy no light in the night sky.



While I made multiple attempts to reach out to several IUIC “schools,” it quickly became clear that there was no interest in talking with me. I was, as I was with the True Nations Israelite Congregation, forthright about my intentions in my emails and believe that this is, in large part, the reason for the lack of response. The defensiveness and mistrust of outsiders is palpable and I do not believe that any supplication or appeal would be able to change that short of showing up to meetings at the IUIC schools. Had COVID-19 not been a factor, I would have certainly made attempts to attend events in person to deepen my ethnographical understanding of these communities.

## **Chapter 5: The Question of Supersession in Black Hebrew Israelite Movements**

Historical Jews have guarded the Torah with fervor and determination for millennia. The sacred words and traditions passed down from generation to generation are revered in the way one yearns for the days of old to be made new again; with a deep sense of hope and nostalgia. The depth and breadth of three thousand years of history and tradition continues to be a source of inspiration for the Jewish people. All of that being true, what has become clear to me in writing this thesis is that Torah also means a lot to Black Hebrew Israelite Movements, and that their claim to proprietorship over the Torah presupposes a belief that the claim of Historical Jews to the Torah, and to the heritage of ancient Israel, is either misguided or historically untrue.

This chapter wrestles with these beliefs, which assuredly offend contemporary Historical Jews. This chapter also seeks to find the balance between “gatekeeping” in discourse about Jewish identity, history, and deciding upon the boundaries of the “tent” of Historical Judaism and what it means for groups outside of that tent to lay claim to the Hebrew Bible and the history that came from this foundational text. I contend that chosen-ness for the Hebrew Israelites is a natural realization of those who have experienced the intergenerational trauma of slavery, segregation, and racist systems and institutions over the course of hundreds of years. Having learned about the practices and beliefs of the Hebrew Israelites who, like Historical Jews, stake a claim to Torah and to Israelite history, I think that believers who

subscribe to an iteration of Hebrew Israelism that focuses on the Hebrew Israelite community (as opposed to anti-Historical Jewish sentiments) will benefit rather than threaten Historical Judaism moving forward.

*Mishnah Avot* 1:1 describes the transmission of Torah from God, to Moses, to Joshua, to the elders, to the prophets, to the Men of the Great Assembly and, in the subsequent Mishnah, to the rabbis and on to the Historical Jews of today. This statement, followed by an admonition that Jews be patient in the pursuit of justice, participate in learning and teaching, and build a fence around the Torah, emphasizes the connection and claim Historical Judaism has over the texts and traditions that arise from Torah. This is all to say that Historical Judaism makes a well-founded assertion based on traditions, texts, histories, and memories to affirm that the Judaism of today is a continuation of cultural and religious expressions of ancient Israel.

Historical Jews are not the only people to make this claim—not for over two thousand years. Replacement Theology, or Supersessionism, is the notion that the New Testament or New Covenant between Jesus and the Church supersedes the Mosaic covenant between God and the Jewish people. This theological idea has its origins in the first and second centuries CE, and, according to Pope John Paul II, it “steadily gained favor until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognized Jesus

as the Messiah and the Son of God...”<sup>130</sup> Even though the Pope, in the pontifical publication “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” challenged the theology of supersessionism as all but heretical, in many ways Christianity depends upon a supersessionist lens in order to understand its own validity.

It goes without saying that at the core of Hebrew Israelism is an assertion that challenges Historical Judaism in a way that is vastly different from Christian supersessionist theologies. Hebrew Israelites do not believe that the New Testament has replaced the Law of the Hebrew Bible; rather, they say that the New Testament is a continuation of and expansion to Mosaic Law. Nonetheless, they do indeed undermine and even reject Rabbinic Judaism as a legitimate continuation of Israelite religion. This is, of course, a concerted effort to discredit the Historical Jewish experience by painting Historical Judaism as wrong or a bastardization of the true history of Israel. And yet, however, many have laid claim to ownership of the Hebrew Bible, I am not sure who truly “owns it.” Furthermore, so long as said “ownership” of the Hebrew bible does not cause injury or harm to the Historical Jew, I must wonder aloud, “who am I to hold the keys to Torah’s gates?” Judaism has long since understood that Torah will be used by peoples other than Historical Jews, Maimonides, in his work *Mishneh Torah*, *Kings and Wars* 11:6-9, goes so far as to acknowledge the fact that other groups will assuredly be aware of, find value in, and mistakenly interpret Torah.<sup>131</sup> The true and deepest problem of

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<sup>130</sup> D'Costa, G. (2017). Supersessionism: Harsh, Mild or Gone for Good? *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, 50(1), 99–107.

<sup>131</sup> [https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh\\_Torah%2C\\_Kings\\_and\\_Wars.11.9?ven=Laws\\_of\\_Kings\\_and\\_Wars.\\_trans.\\_Reuven\\_Brauner,\\_2012&vhe=Torat\\_Emet\\_363&lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah%2C_Kings_and_Wars.11.9?ven=Laws_of_Kings_and_Wars._trans._Reuven_Brauner,_2012&vhe=Torat_Emet_363&lang=bi)

supersessionism is not finding value in Torah, rather it is the intentional “canceling” of the Historical Jewish experience.

In the last five years, increasing numbers of people have encountered Hebrew Israelism in one form or another. While popular culture has seen a few examples in the past, such as artists like Desmon Deker’s 1965 song, “Poor Me Israelites,” which speaks to both the plight of Jamaican peoples struggling to make ends meet and the Rastafarian Movement’s claim to belong to the Twelve Tribes of Israel certainly skirted with popular culture, no musical undertaking has brought Hebrew Israelism to the forefront of American consciousness quite like Kendrick Lamar’s 2017 album “DAMN.”<sup>132133</sup> This album is, in many ways, a self-exploration album of Lamar’s roots, relationships, his life experiences, and his own internal dialogue. Several songs deal directly with Biblical themes mentioned above, like the blessings and curses listed in Deuteronomy 28. On the album’s final track, “Duckworth”, Lamar takes a prophetic stance:

*Damn  
Goddamn you  
Goddamn me  
Goddamn us  
Goddamn we  
Goddamn us all  
So until we come back to these commandments,  
Until you come back to these commandments,  
We're gonna be in this place, we're gonna be under this curse.*

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<sup>132</sup> Deker, D. (1965). Poor Me Israelites.

<sup>133</sup> Kendrick Lamar. (n.d.). DAMN (2017).

*Because he said he's gonna punish us, the so-called Blacks,  
 Hispanics, and Native American Indians, are the true children of  
 Israel.  
 We are the Israelites according to the Bible.  
 The children of Israel, he's gonna punish us for our inequities.  
 For our disobedience because we chose to follow other gods that  
 aren't his son, so the Lord thy God chasten you.  
 So just like you chastise your own son,  
 he's gonna chastise you because he loves you.  
 So that's why we get chastised, that's why we're in the position we're  
 in. Until we come back to these laws, statutes and commandments,  
 And do what the Lord said, these curses are gonna be upon us.  
 We're gonna be at a lower state in this life that we live here in  
 today,*

Lamar's verses profess a commitment to the beliefs of Hebrew Israelism. His cousin, Carl Duckworth—otherwise known as Karni Ben Israel, a prominent member of Israel United In Christ (IUIIC)—taught Lamar about Hebrew Israelism and provided content for the album. Duckworth is mentioned three times on the album. He is prominently featured in several songs through spoken word recordings that are presented as voicemails left for Lamar. In one example from the beginning of the song “Fear”, Duckworth says,

*What's up family, yeah it's yo cousin Carl man, just givin' you a  
 call man. I know you been havin' a lot on yo mind lately, and I  
 know you feel like ya know people ain't been prayin' for you, but  
 you have to understand this man, that we are just people.  
 Deuteronomy 28:28 says, 'The Lord shall smite thee with  
 madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart.' See family  
 that's why you feel like you feel like you got a chip on your  
 shoulder. Until you finally get the memo, you will always feel that  
 way...*<sup>134</sup>

Lamar seems to respond to this message in the song entitled “YAH”, when he writes, “I’m not a politician, I’m not 'bout a religion. I’m a Israelite, don't call me Black no mo’ That word is

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, “Fear”.

only a color, it ain't facts no mo'. My cousin called, my cousin Carl Duckworth said know my worth and Deuteronomy say that we all been cursed. I know he walks the Earth."

This monumental album thrust Hebrew Israelism to the forefront of the Hip-Hop world, spawning conversations among bloggers, podcasts, and perhaps most notably, a conversation between Richard "Professor Griff" Griffin and Nick Cannon on Nick Cannon's podcast, "Cannon's Class." A refrain throughout the interview was, "how can I be antiSemitic if I am the Semite?" This statement highlights the question I am trying to uncover in this chapter, which is: why is the suffering and claim to the history of the ancient Israelites from Historical Jews and Hebrew Israelites in competition with each other when the claims of Hebrew Israelism are not inherently dependent on the tearing down of Historical Jews? My first inclination is to call this supersessionistic appropriation, but in reality, African Americans are and have experienced significant unresolved trauma that closely resembles the experiences of the Israelites of the Bible. And yet, the millennia of suffering experienced by generations upon generations of Historical Jews is just as legitimate as the suffering of Black, Indigenous peoples, and peoples of color. Perhaps more importantly than this point of legitimizing the real suffering of these groups is the point that suffering need not be compared because the ultimate goal of those who adhere to Torah should be to end suffering throughout the world.

In his interview with Professor Griff, Nick Cannon asked several questions that reveal a problematic misunderstanding of history and display what I perceived to be a desperate search for identity that leaps from one diasporic expression to another; from the Nation of

Islam, to Hebrew Israelism, to Black Nationalism, to Pan-Africanism and beyond. There is an apparent tendency, in black religion, to create a tapestry or amalgam of various faith traditions. As Henry Mitchell puts it, many of these expressions of African American diasporic identity reflect the fact that “Black religion is qualitatively different in its history, development, and meaning from the faith traditions with which it shares myths, sacred texts, and doctrines.”<sup>135</sup> What is perhaps most telling about the conversation between Cannon and Professor Griff is the claim that “we [the African Diaspora] are the first Free Masons, we are the illuminated ones [referring to the Illuminati], we are the ones who established the first secret societies.” This is fascinating because, in the same breath, Cannon would tear down these institutions as being colonialist and oppressive while simultaneously appropriating the power he perceives inherent in these institutions as his own, save to say that most of these institutions exist only in the realm of conspiracy!

This, returning to the question above, is the crux of this chapter. Institutionalized suffering is a nearly universal experience; all groups have certainly experienced suffering and oppression. However, African Americans, Jews, Hispanics, Indigenous, and other marginalized groups all share a claim to suffering that requires indemnity. There is an inherent danger in the proverbial “Suffering Olympics” whereby groups try to prove that one suffering was greater than another’s.<sup>136</sup> At the crux of the crux, so to speak, is an apparent need to undermine the

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<sup>135</sup> Key.

<sup>136</sup> Aidi, H. D. (2005). Slavery, Genocide and the Politics of Outrage: Understanding the New Racial Olympics. *Middle East Report*, 234(Spring), 40–56.



Jewish experience seemingly for the sake of credibility. This competition in suffering is likely detrimental to any sympathy that is warranted to those Black Hebrew Israelites who, for the most part, are interested in strengthening the communities where they practice and preach. It is important, however, to be aware of the ways in which Hebrew Israelism attempts to undermine Historical Judaism, the history behind these methods, and perhaps some ways to isolate the problematic beliefs from the beliefs that are important to developing Black empowerment.

There are two main methods in which I have observed Hebrew Israelites intentionally undermining the experience of Historical Judaism. These two methods are often viciously antisemitic, they are often based on conspiracy theories that have little to no factual or historical basis, and they represent a prime example of confirmation bias whereby the evidence gathered only serves to confirm the preconceived notions of the group. The first method is the belief that Historical Jews are Amalek. Amalek, according to Genesis 36:12 KJV, was the grandson of Esau (of famed Jacob and Esau). In one particular interview, an IUIC elder explained that the Historical Jews are, in reality, Amalek. Amalek, according to Torah and tradition, is the sworn enemy of Israel and should be, “blotted out from memory under heaven.”<sup>137</sup> Hebrew Israelites understand the implication of such a remark and, not unlike other antisemitic rhetoric, utilize Historical Jews as the proverbial scapegoat or source of the societal woes experienced by BIPOC the world over.

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<sup>137</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

The Anti-Defamation League notes, in their assessment of Israel United In Christ, that IUIIC “reject[s] Christianity, Islam, and Judaism” and call Historical Jews “the bastards that funded the slave trade” and “blame Jews and other ethnicities for all social ills plaguing black individuals...[and] assert that Jews and white people worship the devil [and] will become the slaves [of Hebrew Israelites] in Heaven.”<sup>138</sup> While this might be an exaggeration of the role Jews played in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade (Dorman points out that Jews played “almost no role in the slaving operations of England and France”) Judaism must come to terms with the devastating reality that European Jews played *some* role in profiting from the sale of human beings as well as consistently owning African human beings as property.<sup>139</sup> The Jewish Museum of London via historian Seymour Drescher reports that “there was a time when Jewish people controlled about 17% of the Caribbean trade in Dutch colonies.”<sup>140</sup> And yet, and perhaps most importantly, the atrocities committed by Historical Jews should not and do not somehow cancel out the persecution of the millions upon millions of Historical Jews who have suffered throughout the course of history simply because of their Judaism.

The second baseless historical theory some Hebrew Israelites espouse is the Khazar theory. The Khazar theory is the antisemitic, historically unfounded belief that Ashkenazi, European Jews are entirely foreign to “true” Jewish ancestry. The Khazars, in fact, were from

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<sup>138</sup> ADL, 2.

<sup>139</sup> Dorman, 59.

<sup>140</sup> *Memento Mori and the Dutch and Jewish involvement in transatlantic slavery*. The Jewish Museum London. (2019, December 3). Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://jewishmuseum.org.uk/2019/12/03/memento-mori-and-the-dutch-and-jewish-involvement-in-transatlantic-slavery/>.

a clan of warring marauders who converted to Judaism in the 8th century CE. The scholarly consensus is such that Judaism was a religion of the elite of Khazar society and perhaps some non-elite members as well. Scholars agree, however, Khazars certainly did constitute the majority of Eastern European Jewry; not before the 8th century CE and certainly not after.<sup>141</sup>

In a video from the True Nation Israelite Congregation entitled “Khazars”, the leadership introduces the congregation to the Khazar theory from their own perspective using Biblical analysis to bolster their claims. Verses like Revelation 2:9, which reads, “I know thy works, and tribulation, and poverty, (but thou art rich) and I know the blasphemy of them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”<sup>142</sup> In the video, the deacon says things like, “they don’t want to admit it, but they know what they are” and proceeds to cite a quote from a posthumously discovered hoax-interview with Harold Wallace Rosenthal, a senior aide in the United States Congress and victim of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine terrorist attack against patrons waiting for an El Al flight in 1976 in Turkey. The quote, which has been cited numerous times and used as almost a new version of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion (another deeply antisemitic and problematic hoax), reads, “Most Jews do not like to admit it, but our god is Lucifer...and we are his chosen people.”

In this video, however, the crowning piece of evidence for the argument made by the TNIC leadership, the keystone upon which the thesis of the entire lecture rests, is an article, nay a blog post from the Times of Israel Blog entitled “Leaked Report: Israel acknowledges

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<sup>141</sup> <https://twitter.com/CitizenWald/status/1412540508379942919>

<sup>142</sup> Revelation 2:9. (KJV)

Jews in fact Khazars; Secret plan for reverse migration to Ukraine.” Jim Wald, the author of the aforementioned “article”, is a “professor at Hampshire College, where he teaches modern European cultural history, including the history of antisemitism and fascism, and the history of the book.”<sup>143</sup> The since-deleted article which the Hebrew Israelites depended upon to prove their case against the “so-called Jews” was in fact a satire piece designed to undermine the entire Khazar Theory argument by leaning into the absurdity of the theory itself and the overwhelming absence of historical scholarship to support the theory.

The reality, however, is that at the root of this version antisemitism is deep and shared trauma of the African American experience. When juxtaposed with perceived stereotypes of “the Jews”, Hebrew Israelites who subscribe to these problematic beliefs expose a certain resentment that gives rise to comments like:

What do [Jews] run, what do they rule? They rule America. How many different countries do they get reparations from? We can't get a cent. They run your educations your educational institutes, the institutions of higher learning. They govern over the communication hubs of the entire earth. The movie business, the entertainment. They control the money they own the federal reserve. But they don't control this. See that, that's the type of mentality that these people have.<sup>144</sup>

While this particular manifestation of supersessionism may be troubling for many Jews in a way that is perhaps different than the supersessionism of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter

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<sup>143</sup> Wald, J. (n.d.). *Jim Wald's Blog*. The Blogs. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/author/jim-wald/>.

<sup>144</sup> (2018). *The Khazars*. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnJw6xNB2M8>.

Day Saints, Messianic “Jews”, and Christians who appropriate Jewish rituals, the question remains why does this disdain for Historical Jews exist and what action must Historical Judaism take to educate and rectify public perception?

My research has painted a picture of the BHIM as a completely unique expression of religion and culture with the only sense of supersessionism coming from an apparent need to tear down Historical Judaism. Until this point, I have left unanswered the elephant in the room. There is an overwhelming absence of legitimate scholarship to support the claims of the Hebrew Israelites. Religion, of course, is no stranger to making outlandish, faith-based claims with little to no evidence, and this cannot be ignored in the case of the Hebrew Israelites who, in no small part, use conspiracy theory, debunked myth, and uncorroborated claims to support their own. For example to the Hebrew Israelites, Revelation 2:9, which discusses the “fake Jews” worshipping in “their Satanic synagogues”, does not refer to hypocritical Jews at the time of the Roman occupation, but rather all Jews (which really only refers to Ashkenazi Jews) are fake Jews who worship Satan and are, “claiming to be you [Israelites].”<sup>145</sup> At the core of legitimate research is allowing the data to speak for itself. There are many forms of legitimate data, but the moment the outcome is decided upon before the data is given the chance to speak, the integrity of the claim is diminished to nothing. This is all to say that confirmation bias is at the very core of my critique of Hebrew Israelism. By assuming that correlation is equivalent to

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<sup>145</sup> True Nation Israelite Congregation. (2022). *A Stolen Identity: They Which Say They Are You*. Retrieved February 27, 2022.

causation, dangerous conspiracies and erroneous theories gloss over the necessary connective tissue between the points conspiracy theorists want desperately to connect.

The intent for the final thoughts of this thesis is to find a path forward for Jewish communities who find themselves wondering how to navigate interactions with Hebrew Israelite groups. This is essential as we, the Historical Jews, have an ethical responsibility to respond to and honor the plight of those who are oppressed, while also necessarily defending and preserving Historical Judaism. The reality is, Historical Jews do have a unique vantage point. Historical Jews have the experience of oppression, which is to say the knowledge of what it means to be oppressed. This is the central theme of the Passover holiday and perhaps the reason that the Reform movement has taken such a strong stance in support of ideals like *Tikkun Olam* (repairing the world) and Social Justice.

And yet, the unique perspective of this moment in Historical Judaism is that assimilation has allowed for many Historical Jews to “pass” in a way that has not been possible before modernity. This is to say, what opportunity is Historical Judaism taking advantage of to create space for those who want to empower their communities and, furthermore, what missed opportunities have there been to lift up these efforts because of fear, anger, or ego. To quote Robert Jones jr. (often misattributed to James Baldwin), “We can disagree and still love each other, unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and

denial of my humanity and right to exist.”<sup>146</sup> It is my hope that Jews might seek ways to extend olive branches to the Hebrew Israelite communities by engaging with these communities, by asking questions out of a place of curiosity, and seeking opportunities to understand the way in which these beliefs empower and uplift BIPOC communities. It is also my hope that Hebrew Israelism will one day seek to understand Historical Judaism as a tradition that is rich with meaning, history, and an opportunity for deep learning.

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<sup>146</sup> Jones jr., Robert [@SonOfBaldwin]. “We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist.” *Twitter*, 18 August 2015, <https://twitter.com/sonofbaldwin/status/633644373423562753?s=21>.

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