



African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem

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Introduction

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ) are an expatriate African American community who have lived in Israel since 1969. They are part of a broad 'Hebrew Israelite' movement stemming from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which holds that African Americans are the authentic descendants of the ancient Israelites (sometimes misleadingly referred to as simply 'Black Jews' due to some of the groups' extensive incorporation of modern Jewish rituals, texts, language, and symbols). Their leader, Ben Ammi (1939–2014), while taking much of his theology and eschatology from the thought-world of the Hebrew Israelites, developed a unique vision based around his group's experiences, which has explained and sustained their continued existence and increasing prominence as a new religious movement. He took the group to Israel partly to escape the impending divine judgment and punishment of the United States, and his outlook remained messianic and eschatological: he taught that we live in a kind of End Times, when European domination is ending and the Israelites, having been punished with a new enslavement for forgetting their God and his laws, are now reclaiming their role as leaders of humanity. Accordingly, the AHIJ represent the Kingdom of God [prophesied](#) in the book of Daniel that will lead Israel and humanity back to righteousness. They currently number around four thousand people in Israel, with large satellite communities in the United States, the United Kingdom, Caribbean, Ghana, and Kenya.

Origins and Cultural Background

While the African American identification with the Israelites (seemingly due to resonance with their internment, bondage, and liberation in Egypt and Babylon) was an established motif apparent as far back as the negro spiritual songs, by the late nineteenth century some preachers in the southern United States were teaching that African Americans were the descendants of the Israelites, furnishing scriptural arguments for the Israelites' Blackness. As Black families moved from rural southern states to northern cities in the 'Great Migration' (from 1916 onwards) in search of work, the first autonomous African American synagogues were formed in New York City and Chicago. From this point there was a spectrum of practices, from para-rabbinic congregations with rabbis and Torah scrolls to semi-Judaic Christian congregations who worshipped Jesus while asserting their own continuity with the people of the Bible.

Emerging in Chicago in the 1960s, the AHJ shared with many other Hebrew Israelite groups an imminent apocalyptic belief, specifically that the United States was soon to be destroyed as the culmination of the Israelites' (African Americans) liberation. This led to their fleeing America in the 1960s and their establishment in Israel in 1969. After two decades of tension with the Israeli state, they are now an accepted and integrated part of that society.

By the 1960s some African American thinkers perceived, in the increasing tension within America and the apparently progressively liberatory arc of history, an imminent apocalyptic reckoning: after the emancipation from slavery was passed into law in the north and subsequently the south United States (1863–65) and after the Jim Crow segregation laws (c. 1870–1965) gave way to the Civil Rights and then the Black Power movements, the final overthrow of the system that had oppressed African Americans was the next logical step. This was seen in the same biblical-[prophetic](#) terms as were their enslavement and liberation—the Messianic Age was one where the people of Israel would be re-established and their persecutors would reap their comeuppance. At the same time, there was an established and growing ideology of emigration, influenced by Garveyism, Zionism, and biblical prophecies of return to the Promised Land. Some Hebrew Israelite groups predicted the year 2000 as the coming apocalypse, after which the Black Christ would return and expel the European Jews from Israel so that the true Israelite descendants—African Americans—could take their rightful place there. These motifs of emigration from America, return to the lost homeland, and an apocalyptic sensibility combined when the group who would become the AHJ, led by Ben Ammi, met on Passover, April 1967, to await their transportation out of America. Members of the group had interpreted biblical prophecies to mean that America would face its final judgment and the year 1967 was ordained for their escape, supported by a vision Ben Ammi received from the Archangel Gabriel. Their initial expectation of being lifted from America during the Passover festival did not come about, leading to their boarding planes three months later (the Passover disappointment was seen as a test, from which they decided the responsibility to pursue this exodus was on them). They resided first in Liberia, before entering Israel in 1969.

Their first decades in Israel were marked by tension with the Israeli state, which did not accept their claims to Israelite descent and which they did not accept as legitimate rulers of the land (because the biblical promise of the Holy Land belonged to them rather than modern Jews). However, efforts on both sides since the 1980s have gradually led to mutual acceptance such that the community is now a liked and integrated part of the state (occasional instances of racism notwithstanding). The group is significantly less militant and apocalyptically oriented than in the past, although it still holds to its messianic beliefs and agenda of global regeneration.

Leaders and Membership

The undisputed leader of the AHJ was Ben Ammi (1939–2014). (While Ben Ammi's dates are known with certainty, the same cannot be said for any others and some have no publicly available information. Often even discovering their birth names is difficult.) Born Ben Carter in Chicago, he was introduced to Hebrew Israelite ideas in 1963 and quickly helped to found the Abeta Hebrew Culture Center, an initiative to unite the various Hebrew Israelite and Black Jewish factions in the city. Here he formed strong bonds with Shaleak Ben Yehuda (Louis Bryant, 1927–c. 1990) and Yaacov (James) Greer. It was Greer who furnished the biblical proof for 1967 as the year of emigration, and Ben Yehuda who penned the group's first

monograph, *Black Hebrew Israelites from America to the Promised Land: The Great International Religious Conspiracy against the Children of the Prophets* (1975). During their sojourn in Liberia, Ben Ammi became sole leader of the group, largely as a result of his handling of a particularly difficult occurrence: at Passover 1968 the goat purchased for sacrifice was found dead, having strangled itself on its bindings. This meant the group could not perform the central biblical ceremony, seemingly prevented by an act of God—an undeniably bad omen. After some contemplation, Ben Ammi came to the realization that this was a sign from God not of displeasure but that they should no longer sacrifice animals. This led to the community adopting a vegan diet a few years later.

Ben Ammi was a charismatic and decisive personality, and encouraged fierce loyalty. Most of the remaining Liberian contingent followed his plan to move into Israel in 1969 (some returned to the United States and a few stayed in Liberia), at which point he resisted Israeli attempts to convert the group to rabbinic Judaism. He is considered one of a running line of messiahs by the group, which include the biblical [prophets](#), Jesus, and Mohammed. He is referred to as Abba (father), and his picture adorns at least one wall of every apartment. Ben Ammi's death in 2014 has not caused any obvious problems (despite his prominent teaching of eternal life for the community if they followed God's laws) and the community is still thriving.

The community numbers roughly four thousand in Israel (although they refuse any exact survey of their population, based on Exodus 30:11-13). They live mostly in the southern Negev towns of Dimona, Mitzpe Ramon, and Arad, where members were initially settled. In Dimona the locus is Kfar haShalom ('the Village of Peace'), a disused immigrant absorption centre which was given to the community in 1980. Members live all around Israel, however, depending on the usual factors of work and other day-to-day needs. Communal provision is made where possible for costs such as rent and energy usage.

Other notable figures include Asiel Ben Israel (Warren Brown, b. 1941), once Ben Ammi's right-hand man and the representative of the group in the United States, who split with Ben Ammi and left the group in 2010; Hezekiyahu (Charles) Blackwell, the first member to enter Israel and overseer of the Mitzpe Ramon residence; Gavriel HaGadol (William Butler), leader of the Arad residence; international affairs director Immanuel Ben Yehuda; spokesperson Ahmadiel Ben Yehuda and representative and Crown Sister Yadah Baht Israel.

The vast majority of the community have been African American, although the group has a growing membership around the globe. At least two members in Israel are White (including an Ashkenazi Israeli). While Ben Ammi emphasized the group's mission to Black peoples (without clearly defining what this meant), they have softened their stance considerably since the 1970s and see their objective as a universal one for all humankind.

Beliefs

The core belief of all Hebrew Israelites is that the ancient Israelites were Black Africans and that African Americans are descended from them. The Israelites migrated west and south across Africa in various waves, ending with the Judaeans after the Roman expulsion from Palestine. Having forgotten their God, laws, and language, they invoked the curse of a second enslavement (Deuteronomy 28), which was

enacted by Europeans, who took the Israelites to America, where they dwelt as slaves for four hundred years. Some accept that modern Jews are also descended from the Israelites, but some do not. Ben Ammi initially taught that Jews are not Israelites but are part of a conspiracy to conceal the true nature of the Israelites even from themselves, and prevent them from returning to God and righteousness. However, his public pronouncements softened considerably as part of mutual peace-building efforts with the Israeli state.

The AHIJ's members live by biblical law, observing shabbat, clothing and marriage regulations, festivals, and so on. They do not accept the Talmud or any rabbinic writings. They read the New Testament and some other Second Temple Jewish literature, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, but do not accord divine authority to anything but the Hebrew Bible. They are vegan and emphasize health as a divine mandate. Frequently through the year, they keep days or weeks during which no salt, sugar or cooked foods can be consumed. Everyone must exercise three times a week. Wherever possible, needs are met from within the community rather than from relying on others. The AHIJ is fundamentally pacifist, although its youth perform military service in the Israel Defense Forces and they have committed to defending the land they live in.

While members of the community vary in their own beliefs, the definitive statement is always that given by Ben Ammi, who decreed the community's outlook, narrative, practices, and relationship with the world via his writings, speeches, and internal communications. Ben Ammi authored eleven books between 1982 and 2011, which develop various aspects of his theology, eschatology, and social programme. Ben Ammi's theology is biblically based, and his interpretations share much with earlier generations of Hebrew Israelite preachers. As such, God is understood as a spirit that dwells in human beings (rather than a transcendent heavenly being), and no mention is made of an afterlife. Ben Ammi determines God—commonly called Yah—to be the force of life and growth in reality, that which humanity must align itself with in order to thrive; to do otherwise is to worship a non-divine and non-life-giving force, "satan", and leads inexorably to decay, destruction, and death. Righteous living is the core part of Ben Ammi's thought, where the 'worship' of God is manifest in how life is lived, which must be judged against revealed biblical guidance given to the Israelites.

Eschatology and Apocalyptic Ideas

Ben Ammi's eschatological views changed over time. From the outset, he predicted an imminent destruction that would consume the United States and anyone who remained there. As the ordained year of 1970 came and went, he abandoned that specific prediction. By the time Morris Lounds was interviewing the AHIJ in 1972-73, the date had moved to 22 September 1977, the 'year of the Kingdom of God', when Ben Ammi claimed there would be 'a war like a war that has never been, and never shall be again between almighty God and Satan'. Then, the current state of Israel would be swept away and 'the Kingdom of God will be in its glory at Jerusalem ... recognized by the governments of the world' (Lounds 1981, 57). This correlates with the date that Ben Ammi was anointed in a public ceremony as King of Kings and Lord of Lords; after his coronation he announced that America had temporarily been spared its retribution but the old age of the Euro-gentiles had now ended and the New World Order had begun. In subsequent years his stance moderated considerably from the first decade's assertions of global catastrophe heralding the new righteous order and his antagonism with the state of Israel. While it is

possible to argue that disappointment of his [prophecies](#) led to a more conciliatory approach, Ben Ammi always publicly claimed that it was a shift in Israel itself towards accepting the AHJ, combined with its own gradual learning and acceptance of Israel and Israelis, that led to the possibility of reconciliation. In 1980 he stated:

From 47th Street and from Dimona there is a different view of Israel. We've been here for eleven years and something has rubbed off. Our position has moderated. I see the community as a flower that will blossom and be beautiful into the landscape of Israel. I feel we have a lot to contribute to the State. (Borsten 1980)

Within the community, however, he taught that the world's gradual acceptance of them was confirmation of divine favour.

In his third publication, *The Messiah and the End of this World* (1991b), Ben Ammi revisited and revised all of these prophecies. The year 1970 was now not the end of America; rather, that year's Yom Kippur (the biblical 'day of atonement' festival) was the date on which the kingdom was officially established. Ben Ammi argues that the creation of a new world could only begin after atonement for the sins of the previous. This date heralded the beginning of the 'inevitable decline of Euro-gentile dominion' (1991b, 148) as the mustard seed kingdom of less than two hundred people was initially set, fulfilling the everlasting kingdom prophesied in Daniel 2. The intentional formation of the kingdom at April 1967's Passover had heralded the reunification of Jerusalem, which took place only six weeks later, in June, at the culmination of the Six Day War:

Our motion was the spiritual force behind the success of the Six Day War because the unification of Jerusalem was a prerequisite for the establishing of the Kingdom of God and the beginning of the Messianic Process of Deliverance for all men from the yoke of Euro-gentile economic and social strangulation. The fire that was released by our acceptance of our moral responsibility to humanity activated the process of destruction of the satanic forces and the purification of the earth. (Ben Ammi 1991b, 150)

Yom Kippur (22 September) 1977 was now claimed as the date when the kingdom began to be public, no longer hidden. This was the point at which the AHJ began to proclaim its existence and preach to the world. Now:

The former Heavens and earth are passing away; this world is presently in a period of transition. Many inhabitants of the earth have grown weary of evil societies and evil systems. The yearn for change is stronger than ever before; they are overcoming the fear to speak out against and confute that which is deadly wrong. (1991b, 153-54)

Since 1977 there have been no new prophecies; no subsequent dates have been revealed, as the Messianic Age has now commenced.

In terms of the meaning of the Messianic Age for Ben Ammi and the AHIJ: quite simply it is the passing away of European domination and control. According to Ben Ammi's narrative, the human race has been deceived for centuries by a people who were in the sway of an anti-God, satanic mindset. As God is the force of life, growth, and vitality, to live opposed to God is to emphasize and manifest death, suffering, and decay. And this, the AHIJ claims, is an accurate description of the previous millennium as European peoples plundered the earth, enslaved and killed others, and—fundamentally—concealed the true identity of the Chosen People of Israel. The Israelites were now awakening, having served their prophesied 400 years as punishment for their own forgetting of their nature, their God, and his laws, and they would again take the mantle as the light to the gentiles to lead the world out of the abyss we currently inhabit.

Although Ben Ammi had previously described unprecedented international wars and disaster in the time of America's judgment, which would consume anyone left on the continent as the order of the world was upended, by 1991 his vision became much softer. Rather, the old order had been passing away ever since 1967, and the new one emerging. The world did not and does not face physical destruction by God—in fact, 'this world is [already] being destroyed by the greed motivated Euro-gentile science, technology and evil intentions' (1991b, vii). Because God is the force of creation and not destruction, the return to godly standards will save the world and end the era of violence we have inhabited, but that does mean ending the present system, which is barely concealed devil worship.

And so, as Ben Ammi's book's title makes clear, the reformation of the world, its reorientation, is synonymous with the end of *this* world: this world, its values, and its priorities, will be brought to an end to be replaced by righteousness.

This reformation of the world has far-reaching consequences. It means the dismantling of liberal democracy, a system built upon the belief that humans know best rather than God; it means focusing on health and wellbeing in this life instead of lifestyles that bring about poor health and ultimately death; and it means returning to the laws given in scripture to Moses rather than believing them to have been annulled. It means a wholesale reordering of society to focus on God and righteousness instead of personal interests, liberties, and appetites.

While always stating a concern for all of humanity, the immediate aim has always been the regeneration and rebuilding of Africa and African-diaspora peoples. The land of Israel is understood as 'north-eastern Africa', the head and spiritual locus of the continent. The AHIJ community is actively engaged in many kinds of public good and outreach work on the continent, as well as in the immediate environs that members inhabit, whether Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, or elsewhere. Although the practical focus has always been on African regeneration, this new age is one for all humans, not just the Israelites. While the Euro-gentiles made a terrible error in pursuing unrighteousness, they were ultimately tools of God's retribution against the Children of Israel, who had a responsibility they did not meet:

God's chastisements were devastating and sure. That erroneous decision not only negatively affected the Children of Israel, but by shirking their Divine charge, they caused all nations and people's dreams of living in a utopian paradise, where harmony, justice and love prevailed to be deferred. ... Because the Children of Israel dodged their responsibility to be Godly leaders and pacesetters, and failed to show others the benefits of righteous living, all men were denied the

glory of a world where governments were headed by men governed by God. (1991b, 17)

And so:

The priority of the Messianic nation is to show forth the Glory of God in their lifestyles and morality, that they may bear witness to the benefits of a people living under the laws (instructions) of God. (1991b, 30)

The ultimate end goal for Ben Ammi was immortality—based on his reading of Genesis, Ben Ammi argued that Adam and Eve were never intended to die. Their death in fact was the result of their disobedience, a basically mechanical outcome of their refusal to follow God’s guidance on correct living. As the Kingdom of God has been established, the Era of Deception has ended and the Israelites are reclaiming their truth, following again the correct way. Now the primal sin can be undone; the eternal life for which humans were intended will be the outcome. Ben Ammi supports this assertion with scientific findings and his emphasis on health and wellbeing have seen life expectancy increase significantly from those of Black Americans.

Now, Ben Ammi claimed, humanity is entering a new phase beyond any prophecies revealed in the Bible, which taught only of our *descent*. Having retraced our steps back to Eden and undone the errors of Adam and Eve, what stands before us is an ascent into an unprecedented era of unending life and harmony, as it should have been.

Ben Ammi’s eschatological theology presents a reinterpretation of biblical messianism, geared to the concerns of modern African Americans. Where Ben Ammi differs from his peers and progenitors is that he felt the urgency to put his ideas into practice and the tenacity to stick with them. In following the long tradition of reinterpreting disproved [prophecies](#) to fit the evidence, Ben Ammi helped his community to forge a strong identity and future far away from their beginnings at the bottom of American society. Furthermore, his tenacity in not simply deferring his apocalyptic prophecies when they were disappointed, but asserting that they were being realized in a more subtle way, allowed the community to maintain their ideals and to hold that we have now entered the Messianic Age of positive growth and to set about living by that principle.

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Note

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