

= Black Hebrew Israelites =

Black Hebrew Israelites (also called Black Hebrews , African Hebrew Israelites , and Hebrew Israelites) are groups of African Americans who believe they are descendants of the ancient Israelites . Black Hebrews adhere in varying degrees to the religious beliefs and practices of both Christianity and Judaism . They are not recognized as Jews by the greater Jewish community . Many choose to identify as Hebrew Israelites or Black Hebrews rather than as Jews to indicate their claimed historic connections .

Many Black Hebrew groups were founded in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries , from Kansas to New York City , by both Americans and West Indian immigrants . In the mid @-@ 1980s , the number of Black Hebrews in the United States was between 25 @,@ 000 and 40 @,@ 000 . In the 1990s , the Alliance of Black Jews (which is no longer operating) estimated that there were 200 @,@ 000 African @-@ American Jews ; this estimate was based on a 1990 survey conducted by the Council of Jewish Federations . The exact number of Black Hebrews within that surveyed group remains unspecified .

= = Overview = =

While Black Christians traditionally have identified spiritually with the Children of Israel , they never claimed to be physical descendants of the Israelites . In the late 19th century among some African Americans , an identification with the ancient Hebrews developed into an identification as ancient Hebrews . One of the first groups of Black Hebrews , the Church of God and Saints of Christ , was founded in 1896 in Kansas , but it retained elements of a messianic connection to Jesus . During the following decades , many more Black Hebrew congregations were established , some without any connection to Christianity .

After World War I , for example , Wentworth Arthur Matthew , an immigrant from Saint Kitts , founded a Black Hebrew congregation in Harlem , claiming descent from the ancient Israelites . He called it the Commandment Keepers of the Living God . Similar groups selected elements of Judaism and adapted them within a structure similar to that of the Black church . He incorporated it in 1930 and moved the congregation to Brooklyn , where he later founded the Israelite Rabbinical Seminary , where Black Hebrew rabbis have been educated and ordained .

The beliefs and practices of Black Hebrew groups vary considerably . The differences are so great that historian James Tinney has suggested the classification of the organizations into three groups : Black Jews , who maintain a Christological perspective and adopt Jewish rituals ; Black Hebrews , who are more traditional in their practice of Judaism ; and Black Israelites , who are most nationalistic and furthest from traditional Judaism .

Black Hebrew organizations have certain common characteristics . Anthropologist James E. Landing , author of Black Judaism , distinguishes the Black Hebrew movement , which he refers to as Black Judaism , from normative Judaism practiced by people who are Black (" black Judaism ") . Significantly , it does not depend on documented lineage to Jewish ancestors nor to recognized Orthodox or Conservative conversions :

Black Judaism is ... a form of institutionalized (congregational) religious expression in which black persons identify themselves as Jews , Israelites , or Hebrews ... in a manner that seems unacceptable to the " whites " of the world 's Jewish community , primarily because Jews take issue with the various justifications set forth by Black Jews in establishing this identity . Thus " Black Judaism , " as defined here , stands distinctly apart from " black Judaism , " or that Judaic expression found among black persons that would be acceptable to the world 's Jewish community , such as conversion or birth to a recognized Jewish mother . " Black Judaism " has been a social movement ; " black Judaism " has been an isolated social phenomenon .

Landing 's definition , and its underlying assumptions about race and normative Judaism , have been criticized .

= = Groups = =

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries , dozens of Black Hebrew organizations were established . In Harlem alone , at least eight such groups were founded between 1919 and 1931 . The Church of the Living God , the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations is the oldest @-@ known Black Hebrew group and the Church of God and Saints of Christ is one of the largest Black Hebrew organizations . The Commandment Keepers , founded by Wentworth Arthur Matthew in New York , are noted for their adherence to traditional Judaism . The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem are widely known for having moved from the United States , primarily Chicago , to Israel in the late @-@ 20th century .

= = = Church of the Living God , the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations = = =

The oldest known Black Hebrew organization is the Church of the Living God , the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations . The group was founded by F. S. Cherry in Chattanooga , Tennessee , in 1886 , and later moved to Philadelphia . Theologically , the Church of the Living God mixed elements of Judaism and Christianity , counting the Bible ? including the New Testament ? and the Talmud as essential scriptures . The rituals of Cherry ? s flock incorporated many Jewish practices and prohibitions alongside some Christian traditions . For example , during prayer the men wore skullcaps and congregants faced east . In addition , members of the Church were not permitted to eat pork . Prayers were accompanied by musical instruments and gospel singing . After Cherry 's death , members of the church believed he had left temporarily and would reappear soon in spirit to lead the church through his son .

= = = Church of God and Saints of Christ = = =

The Church of God and Saints of Christ was established in Lawrence , Kansas , in 1896 by African @-@ American William Saunders Crowdy . The group established its headquarters in Philadelphia in 1899 , and Crowdy later relocated to Washington , D.C. , in 1903 . After Crowdy 's death in 1908 , the church continued to grow under the leadership of William Henry Plummer , who moved the organization 's headquarters to its permanent location in Belleville , Virginia , in 1921 . In 1936 , the Church of God and Saints of Christ had more than 200 " tabernacles " (congregations) and 37 @, @ 000 members . Howard Zebulun Plummer succeeded his father and became head of the organization in 1931 . His son , Levi Solomon Plummer , became the church 's leader in 1975 . Since 2001 , the Church of God and Saints of Christ has been led by Rabbi Jehu A. Crowdy , Jr . , a great @-@ grandson of William Saunders Crowdy . As of 2005 , it had fifty tabernacles in the United States and dozens in Africa .

The Church of God and Saints of Christ describes itself as " the oldest African @-@ American congregation in the United States that adheres to the tenets of Judaism " . Founded by American William Saunders Crowdy in Kansas in 1896 , it teaches that all Jews had been black originally , and that African Americans are descendants of the lost tribes of Israel . Members believe that Jesus was neither God nor the son of God , but rather an adherent to Judaism and a prophet . They also consider William Saunders Crowdy , their founder in Kansas , to be a prophet .

The Church of God and Saints of Christ synthesizes rituals from both Judaism and Christianity . They have adopted rites drawn from both the Old Testament and the New Testament . Its Old Testament observances include use of the Jewish calendar , celebration of Passover , circumcision of infant males , commemoration of the Sabbath on Saturday , and wearing of yarmulkes . Its New Testament rites include baptism (immersion) and footwashing , both of which have Old Testament origins .

= = = Commandment Keepers = = =

Wentworth Arthur Matthew founded the Commandment Keepers Congregation in Harlem in 1919 . Matthew was influenced by the non @-@ black Jews he met and by Marcus Garvey and the

Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League . Garvey used the Biblical Jews in exile as a metaphor for black people in North America . One of the accomplishments of Garvey 's movement was to strengthen the connection between black Americans and Africa , Ethiopia in particular . When Matthew later learned about the Beta Israel ? Ethiopian Jews ? he identified with them . But , Israel recognizes the Beta Israel people as being descended from historic Jews by ancestry .

Today the Commandment Keepers follow traditional Jewish practice and observe Jewish holidays . Members observe kashrut , circumcise newborn boys and celebrate Bar and Bat Mitzvahs , and their synagogue has a mechitza to separate men and women during worship .

The Commandment Keepers believe they are descendants of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba . Matthew taught that " the Black man is a Jew " and " all genuine Jews are Black men " , but he valued non @-@ black Jews as those who had preserved Judaism over the centuries . Matthew maintained cordial ties with non @-@ black Jewish leaders in New York and frequently invited them to worship at his synagogue .

Matthew established the Ethiopian Hebrew Rabbinical College (later renamed the Israelite Rabbinical Academy) in Brooklyn . He ordained more than 20 rabbis , who went on to lead congregations throughout the United States and the Caribbean . He remained the leader of the Commandment Keepers in Harlem , and in 1962 the congregation moved to a landmark building on 123rd Street .

Matthew died in 1973 , sparking an internal conflict over who would succeed him as head of the Harlem congregation . Shortly before his death Matthew named his grandson , David Matthew Doré , as the new spiritual leader . Doré was 16 years old at the time . In 1975 , the synagogue 's board elected Rabbi Willie White to be its leader . Rabbi Doré occasionally conducted services at the synagogue until the early 1980s , when White had Doré and some other members locked out of the building . Membership declined throughout the 1990s and by 2004 , only a few dozen people belonged to the synagogue . In 2007 the Commandment Keepers sold the building , while various factions among former members sued one another .

Beside the Harlem group , there are eight or ten Commandment Keeper congregations in the New York area , and others throughout North America and in Israel . Since 2000 , seven rabbis have graduated from the Israelite Rabbinical Academy founded by Matthew .

= = = African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem = = =

Ben Ammi Ben @-@ Israel established the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem in Chicago , Illinois , in 1966 , at a time of black nationalism and the African @-@ American Civil Rights Movement (1954 ? 68) . In 1969 , after a sojourn in Liberia , Ben Ammi and about 30 Hebrew Israelites moved to Israel . Over the next 20 years , nearly 600 more members left the United States for Israel . As of 2006 , about 2 @,@ 500 Hebrew Israelites live in Dimona and two other towns in the Negev region of Israel , where they are widely referred to as Black Hebrews . In addition , there are Hebrew Israelite communities in several major American cities , including Chicago , St. Louis , and Washington , D.C.

The Black Hebrews believe they are descended from members of the Tribe of Judah who were exiled from the Land of Israel after the Romans destroyed the Second Temple in 70 CE . The group incorporates elements of African @-@ American culture into their interpretation of the Bible . They do not recognize rabbinical Jewish interpretations such as the Talmud . The Black Hebrews observe Shabbat and biblically ordained Jewish holidays such as Yom Kippur and Passover . Men wear tzitzit on their African print shirts , women follow the niddah (biblical laws concerning menstruation) , and newborn boys are circumcised . In accordance with their interpretation of the Bible , the Black Hebrews follow a strictly vegan diet and wear only natural fabrics . Most men have more than one wife , and birth control is not permitted .

When the first Black Hebrews arrived in Israel in 1969 , they claimed citizenship under the Law of Return , which gives eligible Jews immediate citizenship . But , the Israeli government ruled in 1973 that the group did not qualify for automatic citizenship because they could not prove Jewish descent

and had not undergone Orthodox conversion . The Black Hebrews were denied work permits and state benefits . The group accused the Israeli government of racist discrimination . In 1981 , a group of American civil rights activists led by Bayard Rustin investigated and concluded that racism was not the cause of the Black Hebrews ' situation . No official action was taken to return the Black Hebrews to the United States , but some individual members were deported for working illegally .

Some Black Hebrews renounced their American citizenship to try to prevent more deportations . In 1990 , Illinois legislators helped negotiate an agreement that resolved the Black Hebrews ' legal status in Israel . Members of the group are permitted to work and have access to housing and social services . The Black Hebrews reclaimed their American citizenship and have received aid from the U.S. government , which helped them build a school and additional housing . In 2003 the agreement was revised , and the Black Hebrews were granted permanent residency in Israel .

In 2009 , Elyakim Ben @-@ Israel became the first Black Hebrew to gain Israeli citizenship . The Israeli government said that more Black Hebrews may be granted citizenship .

The Black Hebrews of Israel have become well @-@ known for their gospel choir , which tours throughout Israel and the United States . The group owns restaurants in several Israeli cities . In 2003 the Black Hebrews garnered much public attention when singer Whitney Houston visited them in Dimona . In 2006 , Eddie Butler , a Black Hebrew , was chosen by the Israeli public to represent Israel in the Eurovision Song Contest .

= = Allegations of black supremacy and racism = =

In late 2008 , the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) described as black supremacist what it called " the extremist fringe of the Hebrew Israelite movement " . It wrote that the members of such groups " believe that Jews are devilish impostors and ... openly condemn whites as evil personified , deserving only death or slavery " . The SPLC also said that " most Hebrew Israelites are neither explicitly racist nor anti @-@ Semitic and do not advocate violence " .

The Black Hebrew groups characterized as black supremacist by the SPLC include the Nation of Yahweh and the Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ . Also , the Anti @-@ Defamation League has written that the " 12 Tribes of Israel " website , maintained by a Black Hebrew group , promotes black supremacy .