

## British Israelism. A revitalization movement in contemporary culture

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**Citer ce document / Cite this document :**

Wilson J. British Israelism. A revitalization movement in contemporary culture. In: Archives de sociologie des religions, n°26, 1968. pp. 73-80;

doi : <https://doi.org/10.3406/assr.1968.1808>

[https://www.persee.fr/doc/assr\\_0003-9659\\_1968\\_num\\_26\\_1\\_1808](https://www.persee.fr/doc/assr_0003-9659_1968_num_26_1_1808)

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Fichier pdf généré le 04/11/2021

# BRITISH ISRAELISM

## *A revitalization movement in contemporary culture*

### INTRODUCTION.

The origin and persistence of religious sects has frequently been explained as a response to poverty or deprivation (1). The concept of « the disinherited » (2) — as applied to those usually predisposed towards sect membership — is too vague, however, to account for the variety of types of sect which have emerged. More particularly, the concept does not adequately account for the rise and persistence of adventist sects with a largely middle class membership where the generally hypothesised association between economic disprivilege and sect membership does not hold.

Recently, Glock, Wilson, Stark, Talmon and Aberle have all pointed to further dimensions of deprivation with which sect membership might also be correlated, suggesting that the functions of middle class sects can be described more accurately in terms other than the strictly economic (3). In what follows these suggestions are taken up and applied to the analysis of British Israelism — a minority religious movement which, although it bears many of the marks of an adventist sect, draws the majority of its support from the well-to-do.

Each new religious movement presents a new interpretation of the world, offering itself as perhaps the only real solution for the problems of mankind. Any world-view thus presented constitutes an alternative to prevailing ideologies, expressing both the hopes and fears of the people attracted to it and both locating the source of large scale frustration and portraying an alternative which would not, presumably give rise to the frustration of the deserving.

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(1) According to Aberle : « The tradition of considering nativistic, revitalistic, messianic, cult, sects, millenarian, cargo and other social movements as products of dysphoria, dysnomia, anomie, trouble, misery, oppression, resistance, anxiety and so on is so old as to be unpatentable ». (D.F. ABERLE, *Religion Among the Navaho*, Chicago, 1966, p. 316). For some recent examples see Aberle's excellent bibliography.

(2) R. NIEHBUHR, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, 1929.

(3) C. GLOCK, « The Role of Deprivation in the Origin and Evolution of Religious Groups », in R. LEE and M. MARTY, *Religion and Social Conflict*, New York, 1964. — B.R. WILSON, *Sects and Society*, London, 1961, p. 344. — W. STARK, *The Sociology of Religion*, Vol. II, London, 1967, pp. 318-327. — Y. TALMON, « Millenarian Movements », *European Journal of Sociology*, 1966, p. 186. — ABERLE, *op. cit.*, pp. 315-333.

British Israelism is familiar to many as the movement which teaches that the Anglo-Saxons are descended from the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel and thus occupy a position of Divine favour in the relationship of races. Few, however, appreciate the wealth of social and political implications which may be drawn from this one idea. Despite the limited nature of its principle tenet, British Israelism comprises a distinctive Weltanschauung, incorporating some aspects of contemporary social practice but rejecting others. Because the features of contemporary society rejected by British Israelites are those which signify a departure from traditional manners, morals and customs, the present-day appeal of British Israelism can best be appreciated by recognising it as a distinctive response to social change, as an attempt to revise and perpetuate selected aspects of the past.

The persistence in modern Britain of a movement which believes it to be Britain's duty to rule and bring civilization to the world in the name of God, that the Anglo-Saxon-Celtic people are descended from Abraham, that the Pope is one manifestation of Anti-Christ and that Russia will represent the forces of Gog and Magog at the approaching Armageddon, inevitably prompts questions about the composition of such a movement and what functions it performs for its members. One thing is obvious, British Israelism appeared less incongruous 80 or 90 years ago than it does today. The reasons why, at the height of Imperialism a good many supported the movement can never be given adequately but certainly the pattern of association between the circumstances of the time, the fundamentalist evangelism widespread in the middle classes and the influence of the racial theories then current is a comprehensible basis for the genesis of a movement like British Israelism (4).

In modern times, the foundation of British Israelism is not so readily appreciated. Certainly it is to some extent a cultural lag from former days of Empire consciousness. But Britain's international circumstances are not such that recruits are likely to be swept into the movement on a tide of emotional imperialism and religious fervour any more. A close analysis of the movement reveals a subtle change in orientation away from the tireless repetition of Britain's possessions, military feats and economic prosperity, and towards a concern for the social condition of Britain and the problems of her alleged decline as a moral force. A closer scrutiny of British Israel ideology reveals that the movement today appeals to a different social group from that which flocked to its meetings in the last century and suggests, therefore, that the functions of the movement have changed.

#### SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF BRITISH ISRAELISM.

A greater appreciation of what the British Israel movement means to its members can be gained by examining its social teachings in some detail. The movement's political philosophy resembles a kind of Burkean conservatism. To its members, social change is a gradual process of adjustment and modification based on laws of inheritance and ascriptive right. Respect for what Burke called

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(4) There is no authoritative history of British Israelism. This paper is based on a study of the movement carried out between 1963-1965. The British Israel idea is an ancient one but, as a movement, British Israelism originated in the late 1870s. It reached its maximum strength in the 1920s with a membership of about 20,000. Present strength in Britain is hard to estimate but is probably between three and five thousand. For a brief account of the movement's history see *Sociological Review*, March, 1968.

« prescription » is profound, that is, conformity to traditional and unquestioned ways of behaviour as the only method of ensuring a stable society. There is the same assumption that things persist because they are of value and that the past is an arsenal of ideas and proper standards.

The emphasis on heredity pervades British Israel thinking — as it almost inevitably must do, given the importance of hereditary implications for defining the race. Inheritance, to the British Israelite, involves not only the genetic transmission of physical and mental capacities but also the selective transmission of ideas and customs. Not surprisingly, therefore, deference to aristocratic privilege is a marked feature of British Israelism and, of late, the movement has exhibited increasing concern at the aristocrat's waning influence and prestige.

To a movement which has adopted a hierarchical conception of social relationships based on ascriptive rights, the spread of democratic privileges will inevitably represent social decline. By extension, Communism is regarded not only as the enemy in the Cold War but as an internal menace, a threat to the traditional British way of life. The British Israel movement has never differentiated between different shades of left-wing opinion and in consequence, much of the revulsion felt for Communism is carried over to the Labour Party.

British Israelites are ardent monarchists, subscribing to an extreme form of Divine Right theory of sovereignty whereby each occupant of the British throne is regarded as a Divinely - appointed ruler and lineal descendent of the Biblical David. British Israel literature is vague concerning the style of secular government the movement would most readily support but there is no doubt that among members there is much concern over the declining constitutional power of the monarch in Britain.

British Israelites are opposed to the whole present monetary system. The « true Israelitish » exchange is based they believe, on the closest possible relationship between producers and product and buyer and seller. The small trader and artisan exemplify this mode of exchange. The movement offers what is in many ways an accurate analysis of present economic trends — increasing monopolisation of resources, concentration of industry, growing Government intervention in the economy, a mounting burden of taxes and persistent inflation. In a system subject to autonomous economic laws the individual has seemingly lost control over his own welfare. British Israelism in response seems to favour an older type of economy whereby exchange proceeds from community and is immediately both intelligible and personal. What British Israelites demand is the perpetuation of those conditions in which economic and moral precepts of interpersonal relations can be sustained and the ideas of economic individualism and personal accountability revived.

There is a strong current of moral absolutism in British Israelism, an aspect of its teachings represented more by tones of resentment and recrimination at « moral outrages » than specific criticisms and proposals. British Israelites, like many other Non-Conformists, have experienced a sense of anomie as the norms governing approved responses have been affected by the change of social circumstances — by modern institutionalism. A morality derived from precepts set down for an agricultural people, to which all fundamentalists are in some measure committed, is found no longer to apply. The type of problem thus presented is especially acute for the British Israelite who still tends to see national virtue as stemming from rigid adherence to Israelitish laws.

The moralism of British Israelites stems from the fundamentalist evangelical tradition more than Puritanism as their dominant concern is the morality of

others. The social ideas of fundamentalism are quite traditional — a return to the simple virtues of individual initiative and self-reliance, the evocation of, perhaps, small community life against the modern, the sophisticated, the cosmopolitan. The phrase « spiritual and moral re-armament » occurs frequently in British Israel literature and most British Israelites put the blame for what they regard as a general spiritual deterioration squarely on the shoulders of those responsible for discipline — parents, churches, schools, police, the courts — all of whom have succumbed to the intellectual's pleas for leniency. The tone of high moral indignation at current new freedoms which is such a marked feature of British Israelism's attitude to contemporary society finds justification in the conviction that British Israelites are the guardians of the national conscience, for a conviction of the « Identity » brings with it an urgent desire to see that God's chosen behave in a manner worthy of Him.

An extract from a recent British Israel publication gives something of the flavour of the movement's approach to present day problems :

« Think what our shocking neglect of God's written word has meant to us ! ... Here are some of the deadly consequences : 1) Juvenile crimes and moral perversion are increased steadily because the Bible is not made a first priority in school and home, and taught by convinced « born again » teachers (...) No wonder that our homes are disintegrating and becoming lucrative targets for the highly paid experts in profane and often obscene entertainment. 2) The shocking low standards of publicity and entertainment too often contain open blasphemy against God (producing) ... a climate dangerously favourable to moral perversion and crime. 3) The Commandment to keep holy the Lord's Day (...) is more openly broken by the nation. 4) The standards of personal honesty have gone down... 5) In the formal church there is at the moment *no single voice*. 6) Cheap pendants and mammon seeking writers of the third order have made high festival over the faults and sins of our Christian ancestors (whose boots they are not fit to black), and preached licence to the itching ears of a generation deluded by the treacle of welfare without any acknowledgement of the Servants of God whose sacrifices in the last century made this possible » (5).

The concern of the movement with the nation's moral welfare is a relatively recent development but the strident Imperialism by which the movement is most readily recognised continues unabated. The extent of Britain's possessions has never, even in the early days of the movement, been allowed to obscure the fact that the « real » family of nations is comprised of white people only. The current breakaway of the new nations of Asia and Africa is thus regarded as no great loss, especially compared with the « unfortunate family squabble » over Rhodesia. The British Israelite's attitude towards race relations is unequivocally segregationist. He believes not only that races are distinguishable both physically and mentally, that some races are inherently superior to others but also

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(5) *President's Crisis Bulletin*, n° 3, January 1957. The emphasis on « good honest virtues » of purity and simplicity stems in large measure from the British Israel movement's biblical literalism. Communism especially in so far as it involves not material conflict but doctrinal conflict — and the latter is most feared — is regarded as a contamination of purity. Foreign elements cause disruption, complicate life and poison the whole system with dissatisfaction. The British Israelite's attitude towards aliens is ethnocentric in so far as he uses his own culture's norms to judge the behaviour of people from other societies and xenophobic in that his antagonism is directed against all inhabitants of his nation not of the purest racial stock.

that races should be segregated. Much of Britain's alleged current moral, spiritual and economic decline is attributed to the increasing intermingling of races.

The future-oriented, anti-traditional perspective of the radical adventist sect is obviously not a component of British Israelism. But in common with the adventist sect, British Israelism frequently takes « world chaos », « financial upheavals », « spiritual degradation » and natural calamities as portents of the second coming. By adopting Israel's identity, Britain has also inherited her Apocalyptic tradition. The element of millennial expectation is thus heightened as the reversal of national fortunes becomes more drastic, as with the Israel of old. Like the more radical adventist sects, British Israelism is ambiguous about the role of its members in bringing about the Advent. This is to some extent inevitable given a vision of redemption both transcendent and terrestrial. However, what in British Israelism, appears at first sight to be a completely fatalistic doctrine, incorporates the instrumentality of the human will by referring to the essential part to be played in the out working of prophecy by Israel-Britain's fidelity to the promises. The contractual relationship between God and Israel leaves no room for the passive response. The implication is that the millenium can only be achieved through the national redemption of the British.

#### THE FUNCTIONS OF BRITISH ISRAELISM.

A movement's teachings comprise not only a social programme but also a statement of the problems it sees. In this way it both articulates the anxieties and apprehensions of its members and helps the observer to locate them in the social structure. The appeal of British Israelism lies in its re-interpretation of historical processes in prophetic terms and its re-affirmation of traditional values and social relationships. Its teachings constitute an alternative system of values offering distinctive rewards and satisfactions. Most obviously, British Israelism means the substitution of ascriptive, mainly racial indices of cultural identity and social status for those marked by achievement. The Anglo-Saxon, according to British Israelism, has been granted unmistakable and indelible features of superior status. Whatever earthly, mundane trials may intervene to threaten his status, the Anglo-Saxon is assured of a favoured relation with God.

The British Israelite is thus promised membership of a Chosen Race. The movement is also chauvinistic — the nationalism which British Israelism espouses going beyond patriotism (which is based more simply upon emotional associations with the place of origin or adoption and with familiar people) — having its base in a more elaborate formulation of ideals and more sophisticated ideas concerning national tendencies, common language and origin and national destiny. The movement has rarely lost an opportunity to associate itself with the nation's ceremonial and tradition and members display a highly developed knowledge of national custom, history and folklore. Lack of patriotism is looked upon as so fundamental a characterological defect that it is attributed to some genetical mutation or faulty upbringing. Thus, through British Israelism, the power and prestige of a more significant entity is bestowed upon the individual: he is invited to identify himself with a Nation chosen by God to rule, to take on its aspects, absorbing his own personality in the fate and destiny of a greater, more powerful and divinely-inspired whole.

Of greater contemporary significance than the more obvious appeals of racialism and patriotism is the function of the movement as a response to social change. Unlike the radical sect, which regards this world as totally corrupt, British Israelism has not abandoned society but wishes to remodel it. In a world

of changing values, the standards against which the British Israelite has become accustomed to measure his own esteem are being eroded — they are no longer obvious and unchallenged points of reference. Where greater moral flexibility, diminishing individual accountability, are defined as manifestations of evil, those who have not furthered or benefitted from these trends must comprise the righteous.

A British Israelite expresses his perplexity at recent changes :

« We find ourselves increasingly bewildered by the changing pattern of human relationships. The loss of many of the little courtesies of life does not mean a simplification of behaviour, for we are continually presented with new rules to enable us to be « with it » in the modern world. Social success seems to be a combination of sophistication and an ability to « keep up with the Joneses ». Even immorality would appear to be no bar, so long as one can either brazen it out or cover it up, and a good pay packet seems to hide a multitude of sins. We have reached the point where lack of success in a worldly sense can be a good sign : it may mean that a person is loyal to God and refuses to lower his standards. All honour to the Christian who succeeds in maintaining high standards of behaviour » (6).

Here the British Israelite is transposing the indices of status so that suffering in this world is equated with real social importance and success in modern terms with real social inconsequence. The paramount value is not, therefore, achievement of economic success or social prowess but conformity to certain moral injunctions. In this respect British Israelism represents commitment to role (which characterised the rather stable status order of 19th century industrialism) instead of commitment to career which seems to be increasingly evident. British Israelism's response to change is thus to deny the legitimacy of the new values which change has brought. Conflict of values is rationalised as the fight of good and evil, the safeguarding of a prophetic destiny.

If British Israelism is not properly an adventist sect, it can most accurately be placed in the context of other minority religious groups by setting it beside nativistic-restorative movements of simpler cultures (7). This type of movement has arisen most commonly as a response to culture contact and represents a « conscious, organized attempt by a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture » (8). Such movements have as their goal the restoration or perpetuation of only selected aspects partly because only certain features are seen as worth preserving and partly because some features take on exaggerated symbolic importance — generally those aspects which most distinctively mark off the old culture from the new.

In restorative movements the millennial or pre-millennial phase is envisioned as the restoration of an idealized past — they « expect to see restored a former alleged condition of bliss » (9). The role of the movement's members can vary,

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(6) *National Message*, August 1964, p. 245.

(7) « Nor need we suppose that nativistic or restorative tendencies are confined to very early stages of millennialism or to relatively primitive societies. There is a distinct restorative element, involving the cleansing idea which Muhlmann associated with xenophobia in that type of millennialism involved for instance in Anglo-Israelism, which would readily be associated with campaigns such as « Keep Britain White » or the activities of the Klu Klux Klan ». (B.R. WILSON, « Millennialism in Comparative Perspective », *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1963, p. 108).

(8) R. LINTON, « Nativistic Movements », *American Anthropologist*, 1943, p. 280.

(9) WILSON, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

being either active or passive : the movement may advocate purely ritual action, conformity to carefully prescribed ways of behaviour or actually « taking up the Sword » (10).

The appeal of British Israelism lies in its assertion of a specific identity for the British — namely, a people specially chosen to perform a cosmic role. The essence of this « Identity » is the contractual relationship between God and Israel, a set of covenants and promises which are principally moral. Having predicted dire consequences if the obligations of the covenant are abandoned, the British Israelite can point to present troubles — as he defines them — as 'a direct result of the failure to realize Britain's favoured relation and its consequences. In effect, as its social teachings show, this theory is invoked to support a Protestant, Evangelical, fundamentalist, imperialist constellation of values and attitudes which were prevalent in the 19th Century. What was then a conservative ideology has become a restorative one, relating political destiny on the one hand to racial eligibility and on the other to distinctive moral obligations.

British Israelism has become increasingly retrospective, looking to the past for its standard. The past age of imperialism, of Victorian moral rectitude has become in the eyes of the British Israelite an earthly condition of near-millennial proportions. This view is a mixture of desire for a return to the past and anticipation of a glorious future which will re-interpret life in terms of the past. Late 19th Century Britain was a foretaste of the millennium to come, hence this regression to a romantically nostalgic fantasied Britain from which many of the realities of the modern world are pleasantly absent — not only Socialism in a literal sense, but bureaucrats, intellectuals and even features like income tax (11).

British Israelism draws the bulk of its membership from the middle class, a source of recruitment not commonly found among the more extreme religious groups. One of the more convincing explanations for the persistence of British Israelism recognises its particular appeal to members of the more « traditional » middle class (12) among whom the upward mobility of the working class and the ease with which they are able to acquire the traditional symbols of middle class status, has become a threat to their own prestige. Common among this class is a sense of powerlessness, a sense of being out of touch with dominant trends and thus a sense of marginality where there was once a feeling of indispensability. In response there has been a tendency to re-emphasise the social value of characteristics, such as civic and moral responsibility, which the working class has not yet acquired (13). If those threatened in this way are imbued with a strong religious sense, British Israelism offers them a defence and transcendental endorsement of cherished values, thus forestalling the challenges of social change. The disinterested moral reform in which British Israelites are currently engaged is one of the ways a group can act to preserve the dominance and prestige of its own way of life (14).

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(10) See B. BARBER, « Acculturation and Messianic Movements », *American Sociological Review*, 1941 ; — TALMON, *op. cit.* ; ABERLE, *op. cit.*

(11) See P. BERGER and T. LUCKMANN, « Social Mobility and Personal Identity », *European Journal of Sociology*, 1964, p. 341.

(12) The classification of the middle class into « traditional » and « modern » sub-groups follows that of M. STACEY, *Tradition and Change*, London, 1960.

(13) See J. KLEIN, *Samples from English Culture*, London, 1965, p. 403.

(14) See J. GUSFIELD, *Symbolic Crusade*, Urbana, 1963. While particularly anxious to revitalize certain elements of an older culture, British Israelism is limited in the extent to which



Faced with an increasingly « corrupt » society but one in which, as a whole, they have retained their faith, British Israelites advocate, not abandonment but revitalization. Certain moribund features — the monarchy, the aristocracy, imperial greatness, institutionalized religion, traditional values — stand in need of revitalization because their decline represents a departure from a Divinely - prescribed way of life (15). Just how this revitalization is to be effected is not made clear, but here again the movement bears a marked resemblance to its counterparts in simpler cultures. The movement's conception of its own role varies from the passive to the active from ensuring that the minutiae of nationalist ceremonial and ritual are learned and observed to conformity to narrowly prescribed Biblically inspired codes of conduct (witness British Israelites' anxious watch for lapses of moral standards) and even to direct intervention — as the movement's advocacy of carefully defined political and social measures illustrates.

Normally, there is a world of difference between a sense of cultural identity and social status. This is not so in British Israelism where social status and « Britishness » are intimately joined. The present « failure » of Britain is identified with the failure to accept British Israel ideology and maintain the values espoused by the movement — values which are associated most acutely with the social standing of British Israel members. It is unclear whether this association is the result of a process of selective recruitment, or the fact that the « traditional » middle class — the military, the civil servant, the shopkeeper — from which the movement has always recruited has tended to lose status, but either way the association is unmistakable. British Israelism has become a religious sanctification of a set of values and a transcendental estimation of those who are committed to them.

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it can assert its own distinctiveness. The set of values which it espouses are not sufficiently dissimilar to be celebrated in special cultic practices, as, for instance with the Zulu traditional dancing among Shembe's followers (see B. SUNDKLER, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, London, 1948) nor do they permit withdrawal as in the Iriquois' segregation from white Society under the influence of Handsome Lake religion (see F. VOGET, « The American Indian in Transition : Reformation and Status Innovations », *American Journal of Sociology*, Jan. 1957).

(15) For a discussion of revitalization movements see A.F.C. WALLACE, « Revitalization Movements », *American Anthropologist*, 1956.