

Presenting the past as present

An English Hebrew-language badge

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MEDALS TRADITIONALLY are described and their intended messages interpreted by reading their iconography and texts. Often enough, especially with badges in medallic form intended as outwardly visible insignia, the message projected may be couched plainly enough but, as Paolo Giovio (1483-1552) opined with reference to information conveyed by visual emblems in general, plain speaking may not necessarily be ideal after all.¹ Paraphrasing his advice, messaging devices should not be so obscure as to require a sybil to interpret them, nor should they express themselves so obviously that common people grasp their meaning immediately. This advice has been most often cited in connection with the pictorial elements of emblems, especially seals and medals, but Giovio added that their associated mottos should also be considered similarly, using a foreign language where possible to disguise meaning. Pictures and languages are both symbolic media that convey meaning implicitly as well as specifically. Take the relationship between a figure presented in modern garb and one cloaked in archaic robes, the first typically perceived as a direct representation of reality, the other as a metaphor conveniently conflating present affairs with metaphysical concepts even before addressing any specific details in depth. Texts too may be employed metaphorically to assert similarity and continuity, even where a legend is actually illegible to observers. Both methods of graphic exoticism convey implicit information, even before the complexity of figures or texts is engaged more particularly by the observer. Symbolism throws ideas together loosely, a mode of expression more associative than precise. Its virtue is the wide net cast, its risks include misinterpretation.

Medals, tokens and especially insignia bearing so-called Stars of David are frequently but erroneously presumed to be of Jewish origin. Commonly, those of central European, and particularly of German, origin actually indicate a business or institution associated with hospitality, typically a brewery, or the service

of alcoholic beverages (fig. 1). Larger six-pointed-star signs have advertised taverns and inns for centuries. Hexagonal insignia are of course also widely found in both masonic and Muslim contexts (fig. 2) without there being any intent to reference Judaism. Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, is seen to convey a religious significance on medals in Christian as well as in Jewish contexts, even when observers are unable to interpret textual meaning.² With the occasional exception of masonic insignia, the coincidence of a hexagonal star and exclusively Hebrew-language inscription, at least since the mid-nineteenth century, has been a generally reliable indication that a medal or badge was intended to represent a Jewish organisation or purpose.

An exception to this expectation is an unsigned and undated medallic badge with Hebrew on both of its faces and a typical Star of David as a major iconic symbol projected from one side to the other (figs 3, 4). Known examples of this badge are die struck, twenty-five by twenty-five millimetres in size (exclusive of the loop for suspension at the twelve o'clock position to facilitate wearing). The two badges illustrated here appear to be of silver, but gold, copper nickel and bronze examples are also known. Their obverse shows the royal coat of arms of England and, besides the heraldic mottos, the inscription קדוש ישראל חלקנו (Our King [to] the Holy One of Israel). The reverse bears a Star of David, within which appear the words אתם עדי (You are my witnesses). Psalm 89:19 is the source of the first quotation: כי לה' מגיננו ולקדוש ישראל חלקנו (For our shield belongs to the Lord and our King to the Holy One of Israel). The quotation found on the reverse of the medal occurs twice in Isaiah 43: in verse 10, אתם עדי נא-ה' ועבדי אשר בחרתי (You are my witnesses says the Lord and my servants whom I have chosen), and again in verse 12, ואין בכם זר ואתם עדי נא-ה' ואני-אל (And there was no strange god among you, and you are my witnesses says the Lord, and I am God).

The citations from Isaiah are explicit



1. *International Geneva Association of Hotel and Restaurant Employees badge, c.1877, silver, 25 x 21mm., private collection.*



2. *German beer token, c.1910, brass, 20mm., private collection.*



3. *German masonic badge, c.1850, brass, 64 x 50mm., private collection.*

statements of biblical mandates accepted by Judaism: the Jews are the chosen people, they must worship no false gods, and they should bear witness to the one true God. The psalm is rather more difficult to fit into the scheme of normative post-biblical Jewish thought and practice because Jews no longer have a king. Moreover, the royal coat of arms of England is not part of Jewish biblical or religious tradition, so a question arises about what this reference to British royalty could mean in a Jewish context. Might this be a Zionist medal bearing a coded allusion to the Balfour Declaration of 1917?³ Such an indirect message would certainly be consonant with Gioivo's rule and might be plausible if the date of this medal's manufacture could be determined and found consistent with historical events.

S. An-sky was a Russian-Jewish author best known for his play, *The Dybbuk*,⁴ but also an ethnographer who led an expedition visiting communities within the so-called Pale of Jewish Settlement in the south-western part of the Russian Empire (present-day Ukraine) during

the years 1912-14. His group recorded Jewish folk traditions, legends and music and gathered large numbers of artefacts owned by the Jews he encountered. Among the objects An-sky gathered, and which are preserved in the portion of his material now in St Petersburg,⁵ is a much corroded but still recognisable example of the medal here under consideration (fig. 5). For whatever reason, Jews in the Ukraine had already acquired this object before An-sky's expedition, thus excluding any possibility that the Balfour Declaration of November 1917 was in any way related to the medal's issue. Lest it should be presumed that possession by Russian Jews of such an item somehow proves that such an object was inherently Jewish, the fact is that among the objects gathered by An-sky were wolves' teeth, roots and herbs. Such things were worn as apotropaic charms by superstitious Jews just as, contravening the Second Commandment which proscribes graven images, they also wore medallions depicting Moses around their necks in direct imitation of Christian religious practice.



4. Moroccan falus coin,
1854, copper, 22mm.,
private collection.



5. British Israelite badge,
c.1890-1910, silver, 25mm.,
private collection.

A key to understanding the meaning of the medal being considered here is a letterhead which displays not only the Star of David but also a flag of Great Britain, the familiar lion and unicorn supporters of the English royal coat of arms, the words ISRAEL and YE ARE MY WITNESSES, and the citations from Isaiah already noted (fig. 6). The letterhead also displays the flags of the other principal English-speaking nations of the world, including those of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Given this expanded frame of reference, it becomes clear that the genesis of both letterhead and medal is to be associated with the British Israelites, a movement alternatively known as Anglo-Israelites.

The origins of British Israelism⁶ are traceable to the late sixteenth century when the idea was first promulgated that the English were descendants of the ten Lost Tribes of Israel. In the early seventeenth century King James VI of Scotland, soon to be James I of England, described himself as a King of Israel. Of course, many kings in many lands, beginning with the crusades and for centuries afterward, had with a variety of justifications styled themselves Kings of Jerusalem or otherwise inheritors of Holy Land hegemony. Richard Brothers, an eccentric English divine at the end of the eight-

eenth century, claimed that he was personally descended from King David. In the first decades of the nineteenth century Brothers, and later John Wilson in *Our Israelitish origins* (1840), further developed the idea that the English, and hence their colonists as well, were the true descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. By the 1870s this idea had gathered many adherents on both sides of the Atlantic and had also acquired a literature that theorized and 'proved' the descent of English-speaking peoples from the ancient Hebrews. Religious Protestants cited and interpreted biblical prophecies, such as that of Isaiah (Israel will bear another name) or Micah (Israel will be chief of the nations), and cited a reference in Numbers to the lion and unicorn as proof. English was held by some to be derived from biblical Hebrew. The English suffix 'ish', for example, was said to be cognate with a phonetically similar Hebrew word, *ish* meaning man; thus since *brit* is the Hebrew word for covenant, Brit-ish would be read as 'man of the Covenant'. The many names from the King James version of the Bible that were borne by Englishmen were also adduced as proof of kinship to Hebrew ancestors. Entire migratory theories were constructed to bridge the geographic distances separating the Holy Land and British Isles, serving also to identify



6. *British Israelite badge*,
c.1890-1910, silver, 25mm.,
private collection.

several racially similar northern European nationalities (Irish, Danish) as kindred Hebrew descendants. Such conjectures may seem far-fetched to current sensibilities, but in an age in which the Bible and the works of Josephus were the two books found and read in most English homes,⁷ such connections seemed plausible to hundreds of thousands of English speakers. *The Jewish encyclopedia* of 1901 estimated the then current number of believers in Anglo-Israelism at two million.

As noted above and as graphically indicated on the letterhead, Anglo-Israelism also had a substantial impact in the United States, another Protestant-majority and English-speaking country. There it acquired pronounced overtones of Christian identity, so that even today the notion of Israelitic descent persists in American Pentecostal circles. The belief that Christianity not only derived from Judaism but was also its truer, now exclusively valid, successor has a centuries-long tradition. Consequently, by 1910-20 anti-Semitism had become associated with certain elements of the Anglo-Israelite belief community in the United States, for example, in the Ku Klux Klan and its many successors, including the Aryan Nation.

In England and in the Commonwealth nations, however, British Israelism had far

less of an anti-Semitic tendency, initially even attracting some Jewish members and later finding many of its adherents openly sympathetic to Christian Zionism.⁸ The major distinction from the American variant, of course, relates to the role of royalty in the belief system. British Israelites assert to this day that the British royal family are direct descendants of the Davidic line, though not via the Ten Lost Tribes trajectory but rather through a daughter of the last King of Judah.⁹ In that respect, though rarely made explicit, British royalty may be seen as related to the divinity of another Davidic descendant, Jesus.

Anglo-Israelism flourished primarily in the last decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. Today, while still traceable within current belief systems (and widespread in the far reaches of the internet), its heyday in the mainstream of Protestantism within the English-speaking world has passed. In America, sectarians associated with the movement have evolved with a predominant emphasis on Christian identity, not infrequently coupled with white racist overtones.¹⁰ In Great Britain today British Israelism finds its most enthusiastic adherents among the loyalist Protestant sectarians of Northern Ireland.¹¹

Returning to the medallic badges under



7. *British Israelite badge (reverse)*, c.1890-1910, silver, 25mm., State Ethnographic Museum, St Petersburg.



8. *British Israelite letterhead*, date uncertain, private collection.

discussion, it seems most likely that they were produced, almost certainly in Great Britain, sometime after 1890 and, as proven by the An-sky expedition evidence, began to circulate before 1910. Though their size, iconography and texts seem to have remained stable, at least two sets of dies were used in their manufacture, with the letter forms and coats of arms of the two types showing subtle but definite differences. These can be seen in the two badges illustrated here, in which the letter forms of badge shown as fig. 3 are more solid and classical than those of fig. 4, suggesting that it was the earlier of the two versions.

British Israelism as a belief system exhibits a not unfamiliar historical pattern by which an idea originally based in religion extends its agency, gaining nationalist and racial overtones. While once ascendant and broadly popular it has now devolved into many local variants, some little resembling the original movement and many which today are hardly noticeable by outside observers. The medallic badges Israelism produced a century ago were presumably meant to be worn as expressions of personal identity, of pride in historically situated membership of a then dominant worldwide empire. Their fate one hundred years later is to have become, on the one hand, mere collectables, most likely objects of curiosity chiefly of interest to Jewish numismatists and students of religious cults. But they also serve to remind us, in the way ephemera often do, that with the passage of time relationships once important enough to be displayed proudly become mere footnotes to history. ^M

NOTES

1. Paolo Giovio, *Dialogo dell'Imprese Militari et Amoroze* (Lyon, 1559), p. 9; <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=gri.ark:/13960/t6d227485&view=1up&seq=7> (accessed 5 February 2022).
2. Gershom Scholem, trans. Michael A. Meyer, 'The Star of David: history of a symbol', in *The messianic idea in Judaism and other essays on Jewish spirituality* (New York, 1971), pp. 257-81, and W. Gunther Platt, *The Magen David. How the six-pointed star became an emblem for the Jewish people* (Washington, DC, 1991) both explore the history, ramifications and symbolic usages of the hexagram (known as the Star of David, Magen David or Seal of Solomon) from antiquity to the twentieth century. While the hexagram was used occasionally in Jewish contexts beginning in the early modern period, it has been a more reliable Jewish referent only since the mid-nineteenth century. The long-established tradition in German signage of the hexagram as a symbol of beer production and sale, and by extension of hostelry more generally, persisted even during the Nazi period. Masonic employment of the hexagram derives from its medieval and early modern understanding as the Seal of Solomon, builder of the Jerusalem Temple. Islamic cultures frequently employ hexagrams as one of several geometric forms in the face of an iconoclastic prohibition of humans and animal forms in the decorative arts.
3. On 2 November 1917 Arthur James Balfour, then foreign secretary in the cabinet of David Lloyd George, sent a note to Baron Walter Rothschild for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland stating that 'His Majesty's Government views with favour the establishment in Palestine of a home for the Jewish people'. This declaration was celebrated by Jewish Zionists and various mementos including badges were later produced and distributed.
4. S. An-sky was the pseudonym of Semyon Akimovich (Shloyme Zanvil) Rappoport (1863-1920). *Dybbuk* is a Yiddish language term found in Jewish folk tradition that designates the restless and demonic spirit of a dead person possessing and dominating a living person's character.
5. Mariëlla Beukers and Renée Waale, *Tracing An-sky. Jewish collections from the State Ethnographic Museum in St Petersburg* (St Petersburg: State Ethnographic Museum and Amsterdam: Joods Historisch Museum, 1992). The image of the actual medal that An-sky acquired in Ukraine before 1915 is courtesy of the former curator of this collection, Shimon Iakirson.
6. 'Anglo-Israelism', *Jewish encyclopedia*, i (New York and London, 1901), pp. 600-601; 'British Israelism', *Encyclopedia Judaica*, iv (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 1381; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Israelism (accessed 2 May 2021).
7. Beatrice Groves, *The destruction of Jerusalem in early modern English literature* (Cambridge, 2015). Martin Goodman, Tessa Rajak and Andrea Schatz (co-investigators), 'Josephus Project. The reception of Josephus in Jewish Culture'; www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/josephus-project/ (accessed 23 August 2021). Both deal extensively with the scholarly and popular interest in and publication history of Josephus's works throughout Europe and especially in England from the early modern period to the present day. David M. Jacobson (Oxford University) writes: 'The works of Josephus constituted the most widely owned and read book in Britain with the publication of the outstandingly popular translation by William Whiston in the 18th Century, through the 19th Century'; personal communication to the author, 24 August 2021.
8. Based on Old Testament prophesy, many Protestants since the sixteenth century had believed that the return of Jews to the Holy Land (Zion) was part of God's plan. Elements of both English and American Christianity therefore supported and indeed continue to support Jewish settlement in Palestine/Israel.
9. Gregory S. Neal, 'Imperial British-Israelism: justification for an empire', thesis, Southern Methodist University, 1988; www.revneal.org/Writings/Writings/british.htm (accessed 4 May 2021).
10. Julian H. Baily, 'Fearing hate: reexamining the media coverage of the Christian identity movement', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, iv (2010), 1, pp. 55-73.
11. Aidan Cottrell-Boyce, 'Loyalism and British Israelism', *History Ireland*, xxvii (2019), 6, pp. 48-50.