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**Who are the "Black Israelites?"**

By Tal Davis

Recently we received an inquiry about a movement known as the "Black Hebrews " or "Black Israelites. " Historically there have been a number of movements that have use those or similar names. They usually consist of small groups of African Americans, often led by a strong charismatic leader, who claim a direct ancestry from the ancient Israelites. In our research we found one such movement that seemed to fit the profile of the inquiry. In this article we present a brief overview of that group. We cannot be totally sure this is the movement we were asked about, but it seems probable. The group's name is the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.

**History**

In the early 1960s, an African-American steel worker in Chicago, Illinois, named Ben Carter (1939-2004) began a study of Judaism with an Ethiopian Hebrew rabbi in that city. Around 1966, he became known as Ben Ammi Carter or Ben Ammi Ben-Israel. Carter claimed that in that same year he had a vision of the angel Gabriel who told him to take the true Israelite people (Black African Hebrews) back to the Holy Land to settle and establish a new kingdom of Israel. This idea of Black Africans being descendants of Israelites was not new. Others before Carter had taught the same theory of African Zionism in one form or another since the 19th century. Carter called his movement the Original Hebrew Israelite Nation. It is now called the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ).

Carter gathered a small group of followers in Chicago and established the A-Beta Cultural Cen-

ter on Chicago's south side. They became well known in the late 60s when they began a serious movement to migrate – first to Africa, and eventually on to Israel. In 1967, about 350 of Carter's followers migrated to Liberia in West Africa. Liberia is a country founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. While living in Liberia the group, asserting they were Jews, tried to gain entrance into Israel under the Israeli "Law of Return." That law, established in 1950, says that all genuine Jews may go to Israel and become citizens (an *oleh*) based on their Jewish heritage. The requirements are that a person have a Jewish mother or maternal grandmother, or have a Jewish father or grandfather. Applicants who have undergone formal conversions to Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform – but not Messianic) are also qualified.

The Israeli government, however, did not recognize their claims of AHIJ Jewish heritage and rejected their petitions for citizenship. Nonetheless, several hundred, including Carter, entered Israel in 1968 and '69 on work and tourist VISAs. By 1971 those VISAs had expired and the Israeli government imposed strict regulations on them. Some were deported, but most stayed illegally resulting in strained relations with the government – which was accused by some in the U.S. and the U.N. of racist policies. In 1980, some AHIJ members in the U.S. were charged with criminal theft and fraud to support the group and to assist the migration of members to Israel.

In any case, by the early 2000s as many as 2500 AHIJ followers (about 3,000 now) had settled in Israel, most in the village of Dimona in the Negev desert, which they call the "Village of Peace." Reports were that Ben Ammi Carter ruled the community as something of an

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autocratic dictator. Most still live there with permanent residency under work VISAs. Those living in Israel, though not regarded as citizens, are subject to compulsory service in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). In the last couple of years, renewed efforts in Israel to have them deported have been opened in the nation's courts. In the United States, about 2500-3000 followers live in groups residing in Washington, DC, Houston, TX, Chicago, IL, Atlanta, GA, Cleveland, OH., and Tallahassee, FL.

Ben Ammi Ben-Israel (Carter) died on December 27, 2014 in Israel at the age of 75. He had four wives, 25 children, 45 grandchildren, and 15 great-grandchildren. Since Ben Ammi Ben Israel passed away, the community has been led by the "Holy Council," a group of men who hold the title *nasik*, or prince. They are Nasik Aharone, Nasik Avraham, Nasik Eliel, Nasik Elyahshuv, Nasik Gavriel HaGadol, Nasik Immanuel, and Nasik Rahm.

### Beliefs

The African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem believe that they are descendants of the ancient Israelites. They maintain that their true identity was suppressed by a worldwide religious conspiracy, and their ancestors endured 400 years of slavery because they had disobeyed God's laws. They believe the Western world is destined to destroy itself as a result of corruption and sin. They also deny that the Jews in Israel and elsewhere are legitimately descendants of Abraham and the ancient Hebrews, and thus have no claim to the Holy Land (nor do the Arabs). These positions, along with some public statements, have led to charges of anti-Semitism against the group over the years.

They subscribe to two main legal codes: Torah Moshe, the five books

of the Hebrew Bible, and Torah Ben Ammi, the teachings of their spiritual leader, Ben Ammi Ben Israel. Like Karaite Jews, they do not accept the legitimacy of the Oral Law (the Talmud). They may consult the New Testament and recognize Jesus (Yashua) as a "Hebrew messiah."

They believe their purpose is to serve the one true God Yah (a shortened form of Yahweh); to be a "light unto the nations;" to show the world a better, healthier way to live; and to achieve physical immortality through their diet, exercise, and prayer. Men are permitted to marry up to seven wives. Women may have only one husband. Divorce is allowed, but discouraged. They practice a strict vegetarian diet and fast on the seventh-day sabbath, which they observe rigorously.

### Christian Response

It is clear from Biblical and historical evidence that the beliefs and claims of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem are without foundation and that it has all the marks of a Judaistic cult. There is no basis for Ben Ammi Carter's assertions that black Africans are the descendants of the Old Testament Hebrews. Carter's claims to have received messages from the angel Gabriel cannot be taken as authentic since they do not correspond with the biblical revelation. He can only be regarded as a false prophet (Matt. 7:15; 24:11; 1 John 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:1) and his message as "another gospel (of a different kind)" (2 Cor. 11:4; Gal. 1:6-9).

In any case, Christians base our relationship with God on our faith in Jesus Christ as our Messiah and Lord, which is for all people for all time, regardless of ethnicity or race. The Black Israelites need to turn to Christ alone for their salvation, not to any set of legal requirements made or interpreted by any human authority. Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus' finished

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work on the cross and His resurrection from the dead (1 Cor. 15:1-8; Eph. 2:8-9).

Christians who encounter members of this movement, or those who may be sympathetic to it, should lovingly draw their attention to the dangers of

relying on any sources of authority other than the Bible for truth. They should be reminded that there is only one sure way of salvation. Whether they live in Israel or Tallahassee, the members of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem can only find peace and eternal life in Jesus Christ.

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