

# **Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ: Comparing the Preaching Strategies of Black Hebrew Israelite Camps**

Saifeldeen Zihiri  
*Hunter College*

## **ABSTRACT**

Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI) is an often-misrepresented religious movement within the United States, designated as hate groups or extremists by organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Anti-Defamation League. Despite the movement's fairly frequent presence in the news cycle, it remains largely unknown to the public. The most common misperception is the treatment of the movement as a monolithic entity. In order to understand the BHI movement, distinctions must be made between its different chapters or camps. This paper will highlight two camps, Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ, and analyze the difference in how they choose to preach. In doing so the diversity of the movement will be highlighted, allowing for a more nuanced conversation regarding Black Hebrew Israelites. It is important to underscore that religious scholars, particularly Black religious scholars in the United States, have reiterated and continued to argue for a more nuanced understanding of the movement.

# Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ: Comparing the Preaching Strategies of Black Hebrew Israelite Camps

Saifeldeen Zihiri<sup>1</sup>  
*Hunter College*

## INTRODUCTION

Black Hebrew Israelites (BHI) is a religious movement within the United States, often described as extremist in mainstream discourse. The Southern Poverty Law Center, for instance, designates many of the movement's chapters as hate groups.<sup>2</sup> BHI makes frequent resurges in the mainstream consciousness, often in a negative light. One of the chapters, for instance, was involved in the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial between high school students from a Catholic School and a Native American elder.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, the movement was under the

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<sup>1</sup> Saifeldeen (Saif) Zihiri, Hunter College Class of 2019, studied Religion, Political Science, and Human Rights. He is primarily interested in studying broadly national security issues, with an emphasis on extremism and the often disproportionate government response toward extremism. He hopes to attend law school, where he can marry his interests of religion, national security and human rights. This paper was adapted from a thesis with Dr. Barbara Sproul from the Hunter College Religion Program, to which he is eternally grateful.

<sup>2</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center "Black Nationalist"  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>

<sup>3</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial" Washington Post. January 22, 2019.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7) The Washington Post explains the standoff "It began with a now-viral video clip, filmed Friday at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, in which high school students from a Catholic school in Kentucky appeared to be in a faceoff with a Native American elder, who was beating on a drum. The boys, some wearing red hats with President Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, appeared in the clip to be mocking a man, named Nathan Phillips. The clip was widely understood as being centrally about the dangers of Trumpism, and the teens were condemned."

spotlight due to reports that the alleged perpetrators of the Kasher market attack in Jersey City were affiliated with the Black Hebrew Israelite movement.<sup>4</sup> Despite the movement's presence in the news cycle, it remains largely unknown to the public. The most common misperception is that the movement is monolithic, that there is in fact *one* Black Hebrew Israelite movement. While many members of the movement share similar beliefs and attitudes, by some estimates, the movement comprises from 40,000-200,000 people,<sup>5</sup> ensuring diversity within the movement.

In order to further understand the BHI movement, distinctions must be made between its different chapters, or camps as they are often called. This paper will highlight two camps, Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ, and analyze the differences in how they choose to preach. The two camps were selected for their many constants: they share almost identical ideologies, they engage in street preaching as well as some form of digital preaching, and they were both founded in New York. The camps were also selected for one key difference – that is, their vastly different sizes. Israel United in Christ is a growing camp, with over 40 communities in the United States and at least eight communities worldwide. Ambassadors of Christ on the other hand, is almost solely contained within New York.

This difference in size is a result of the individual preaching strategies that the two camps choose to take. The Ambassadors of Christ heavily push a narrative of religious conflict, focusing not only on spreading the word of God but also on attacking those who stand against him. As a result, the camp is less focused on rapidly growing than it is on spreading its ideas. When attracting new members, it focuses on those already prepared to be part of the cause, rather than individuals who are simply interested.

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<sup>4</sup> Anti-Defamation League “Black Hebrew Israelites” <https://www.adl.org/blog/jersey-city-shooting-what-we-know>

<sup>5</sup> Ryan Turner, “Black Hebrew Israelites” Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry. <https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelitesr>

In contrast, Israel United in Christ is largely focused on expanding, seeing that as a more effective method of spreading the message of BHI. While it does share the narrative of a religious conflict, its focus is to establish as many BHI communities as it can. This means taking a more nuanced approach to preaching, focusing on different forms of online targeted efforts to attract adherents. Rather than attacking those against God, Israel United in Christ focuses on including people in their community

### **BACKGROUND ON BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES**

Black Hebrew Israelite beliefs are heavily based upon the movement's perceived relationship to Israelites, that is, the descendants of Israel from the Hebrew patriarch Jacob.<sup>6</sup> BHI members argue that the Jews of today, those who claim descentance from Jacob, are not the true chosen people of God. Rather, BHI members claim that the true descendants of Jacob, the 12 Tribes of Israel, are those people oppressed today: American Blacks, West Indian Blacks, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Mayans (people from Guatemala to Panama), Native American Indians, Seminole Indians, Incans (people from Colombia to Uruguay), Mexicans and Argentinians.<sup>7</sup> Each named group comprises a different Tribe of Israel. The groups are broadly comprised of African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics. BHI members believe that because these groups sinned, "God threw them out of the Land of Israel and they ended up in America as slaves, after sojourning in Africa."<sup>8</sup> The scriptural text that BHI members point to as evidence of this is Deuteronomy 28 which states:

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<sup>6</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 14.

<sup>7</sup> IUIC "Breif Israelite History." <https://israelunite.org/brief-israelite-history/>.

<sup>8</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertationn, 15.

And the LORD shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spoke unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again: and there ye shall be sold unto your enemies for bondmen and bondwomen, and no man shall buy you.<sup>9</sup>

For the BHI members, the reference to ships is alluding to slavery and oppression in America. The enemies who they are sold unto are the white slave owners, and the phrase “bondmen and bondwomen” constitutes the oppression they face. While Native Americans and Hispanics were not sold as slaves from Africa, their treatment under the “enemies”—white oppressors in America—constitutes enough of a punishment to be considered one of the Tribes of Israel. BHI members elaborate that because Jewish people today were not sold or shipped away, they cannot be the descendants of Jacob. As final definitive proof, BHI members point to Lamentations 5:10, which “describes the Israelites who had skin as black as an oven.”<sup>10</sup> This, members argue, is concrete evidence that the Jewish people of today are not Israelites.

Because the Jewish people of today are “imposters,” BHI members do not follow all mainstream Jewish customs and traditions. While they do keep the Jewish Sabbath and other customs such as circumcision, dietary laws and the observance of festivals such as Yom Kippur, they utilize different scriptures. BHI members often use “the Old and New Testament to support their teachings, especially the five books of Moses,”<sup>11</sup> primarily the King James Version. Members also argue that both Jesus and Moses were black and that white people (including the mainstream Jewish members) have attempted to continue persecuting the 12 Tribes by hiding their true identity as Israelites.

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<sup>9</sup> Ljthriplan “Does Deuteronomy 28-68 prove that the Original Israelites were Black?” Followintruth. February 26, 2018 <http://www.followintruth.com/does-deuteronomy-28-68-prove-that-the-original-israelites-were-black>.

<sup>10</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 15.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Turner, “Black Hebrew Israelites” Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry. <https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelites>.

It is important moving forward to distinguish BHI from adherents of the Jewish faith who happen to be black, that is, Black Jews. In *Of Israel's Seed*, Remy Illona explains that Black Jews “are members of the religion addressed as Rabbinic Judaism.”<sup>12</sup> They are recognized as “co-religionists by adherents of Rabbinic Judaism,”<sup>13</sup> and knowingly accept both the identity of “Jew” and “Black.” Black Hebrew Israelites, however, actively differentiate themselves from not only Black Jews but also Rabbinic Judaism. The BHI members claim that they are “authentic descendants of the biblical Israelites”<sup>14</sup> and generally do not “see themselves as Jews,”<sup>15</sup> who they consider as simply practicing the Jewish faith without having the lineage of the ancient Israelites. Because of this, they reject the title of Jew and instead choose to call themselves Black Hebrew Israelites.

This aversion to Rabbinic Judaism aside, the history of BHI is deeply connected to the influence of Rabbinic Judaism on black people, particularly in the United States. As scholars Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfitt explain, “the bonds with Judaism of black Jews were often forged in the harshest circumstances and grew out of slavery, exile, colonial subjugation, political ethnic conflicts and apartheid.”<sup>16</sup> Judaism became a response to discrimination in the United States, which gave African Americans “back a history and allowed them to overthrow American racism’s hierarchy of values.”<sup>17</sup> This take on Judaism was formed, in part, because of the way Christianity had been utilized against slaves in the United States. Churches would preach “that

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<sup>12</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>14</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>15</sup> Illona, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 18.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Bruder and Tudor Parfit, “African Zion: Studies In Black Judaism”(2012). Cambridge Scholars' Press, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Bruder, 18.

the Christianization of the slave would make him dutiful.”<sup>18</sup> An emphasis was placed “on the Scripture: ‘slaves be obedient to your masters,’ from Paul’s letter to Ephesians,”<sup>19</sup> in an attempt to quell slave rebellions and discontent. Many slaves were repelled by this brand of Christianity and, as John Blassingame explains, “formulated new ideas and practices in the[ir] quarters.”<sup>20</sup> These new religious ideals, which focused on liberation, were influenced by the slaves’ “longings for freedom and based on half-understood sermons in white churches or passages from the Old Testament [and] struggles of the Jews.”<sup>21</sup> In this post-slavery period, there was “a sense of identity with the oppressed children of Israel,”<sup>22</sup> ensuring that Old Testament themes continued to inform the religious consciousness of former slaves.

It comes as no surprise, then, that one of the earliest figures to teach that Black Americans were descended from the biblical Israelites was a former slave. William Saunders Crowdy was born a slave in Maryland in 1847. In 1863, after Maryland adopted a new Constitution abolishing slavery, a sixteen-year-old Crowdy went to Union forces, serving as a cook for the cause. Dedication to black sovereignty became a driving force for Crowdy, whose life in the post-civil war era involved actively being a part of a black community.<sup>23</sup> When a Republican Party politician, Edward P. McCabe, began promoting Black settlements in the Oklahoma territory during the late 1880’s and early 1890’s, using scriptural references to sell a promised land free of white interference and ripe with cheap land, Crowdy joined him. One of

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<sup>18</sup> Noel Leo Erskine, “Plantation Church: How African American Religion Was Born In Caribbean Slavery” (2014). Oxford University Press, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Erskine, 115.

<sup>20</sup> John W. Blassingame, “The Slave Community” (1972). New York: Oxford Press, 62.

<sup>21</sup> Blassingame, 63.

<sup>22</sup> Elly M Wynia, “The Church of God and Saints of Christ : The Rise of Black Jews” (1994). Garland Publishing Inc., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ira Srole, “Inner city sanctuary: the history and theology of Rochester's Black Jews” (1978). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology.

the settlements, known as Langston, seemed to live up to this scriptural promise. Unlike most localities in the United States, Blacks in Langston “owned land, ran governments, farmed, steered businesses and taught in the schools.”<sup>24</sup> Crowdy was part of a community where Black influence was clear in all aspects of the community, and, in this environment, he thrived.

The Civil War veteran born into slavery became a respected elder of the community, “a husband, father, farmer[and] Mason”<sup>25</sup> who also served as a deacon in the local Baptist Church. But, as Anthony Pinn explains, beginning in 1893 Crowdy was said to have been acting strangely. He began having strange visions and hearing strange voices, which he would later attribute to the voice of God. The visions culminated into him running into the woods and allegedly falling into a deep sleep, where he was said to receive the foundation of a new church based on both Old and New Testaments. Initially, this new church, called the Church of God and Saints of Christ, did not reject the language of Christianity. Its new prophet, Crowdy, began preaching salvation and the gospel of Jesus Christ in Langston.<sup>26</sup> Eventually, Dorman explains, Crowdy felt the urge to spread the news of the faith elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> He left Langston, with his son Isaac, never to return. As he spread the new faith, he was taunted and punished, in particular, because of his anti-racism teachings and the controversial idea that Jesus Christ was black. In one town, he was even said to have been beaten and bound, wrapped up in the fresh hide of a recently killed buffalo and left for buzzards to finish off. Yet to his followers, those violent experiences provided him with more religious authority: to them, he was a prophet

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<sup>24</sup> Jacob Dorman, “Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions”(2013). New York: Oxford University Press, 35.

<sup>25</sup> Dorman, “Of Israel’s Seed,” 36.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Pinn, Stephen Finley, and Torin Alexander, “African American Religious Cultures”(2009). ABC-CLIO, 153-156.

<sup>27</sup> Jacob Dorman, “Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions”(2013). New York: Oxford University Press, 39.



misunderstood by society. This religious credibility, combined with his enthusiastic preaching style on the streets of towns, gained him popularity. Many of his followers were white, making his Church unique in its racial tolerance during the time of Jim Crow. As his Church grew, Crowdy became more focused on the Old Testament, incorporating Hebrew elements into his new Church. He preached that African Americans were descended from the lost tribes of Israel and subsequently, by 1906, his Church was observing the Jewish Calendar. While it is unclear under what basis Crowdy made his descentance claim, the reasoning is fairly sound. By declaring that African Americans were descendants of the Israelites, he was able to reclaim an identity for the unique suffering that African Americans had gone through. Ilona elaborates, “the Suffering no longer seemed meaningless. They [African Americans] suffered because they disobeyed God. They were His chastened children,”<sup>28</sup> and in that, came a dignified strength. Unlike the Black Hebrew Israelites of future decades, those led by Crowdy “did not have to leave Christianity, abandon faith in Jesus, or give up familiar rituals like baptism and foot washing to become a follower.”<sup>29</sup> By the time he passed away in 1908, he had thousands of followers who believed that Jesus, Moses and the ancient Israelites were black. His Church trained hundreds of ministers, rapidly spreading his belief throughout churches, even to those not directly affiliated with the Church of God and Saints of Christ. Some of these churches would more deeply engage with Jewish practices, opening the door for the Black Hebrew Israelite movement as it is known today.

To be clear, William Crowdy was not the first person to promote the idea that Black Americans were descended from the Israelites. Religious scholar Paul Easterling traces

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<sup>28</sup> Remy Chukwukaodinaka Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed: The Ethnohistory of Church of God and Saints of Christ and African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem" (2017). FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 51-52.

<sup>29</sup> Ilona, "Of Israel's Seed," 46.

identification with the early Israelites to the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the slave revolts of both Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser. More explicitly, F.S Cherry, who founded the Church of the Living God in Chattanooga Tennessee, in 1886, argued that Black people were the true descendants of the Israelites,<sup>30</sup> again on the basis of the unique suffering that his people had undergone. William Crowdy is significant, however, because of his effectiveness in spreading his message, largely attributed to the enthusiasm of his preaching. He was able to reach thousands of followers, from Kansas to Texas and expose them to his descendance theory.

While Crowdy's beliefs were centered around racial equality, some proponents of BHI moved away from that conciliatory message. F.S Cherry's views, for instance, aligned more closely with the racial superiority professed in some BHI camps today. In his book, *Black Zion*, Nathaniel Deutsch explains that the "Prophet Cherry cited his interpretation of disparate verses from the Old Testament [to attest] to the primacy of Blacks in Judaism."<sup>31</sup> Part of this primacy included the creation of a new racialized religious heritage that separated from previously held notions of identity. This included "the rejection of the terms 'Negro' and 'Black' in favor of 'Hebrew,'"<sup>32</sup> signifying Black Hebrew Israelites as a distinct identity. Cherry would expand on this principal by calling everyday black Christian clergy damn fools and vultures.<sup>33</sup> Particularly important was the distinction not only between white Jews and F.S Cherry's movement, but between the movement and white people *in general*. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, the self-professed prophet preached "that white people were inherently evil and hated by

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<sup>30</sup> Anthony Pinn, Stephen Finley, and Torin Alexander, "African American Religious Cultures"(2009). ABC-CLIO, 111-115.

<sup>31</sup> Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, "Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism." (2000). Oxford University Press, 24.

<sup>32</sup> Chireau, 21.

<sup>33</sup> Chireau, 21.

God,”<sup>34</sup> and instructed his followers that “Jesus would return in the year 2000 to install blacks over whites through a race war.”<sup>35</sup> This claim regarding Jesus highlights the difference between Cherry’s movement and the BHI movement today, that is, Cherry still included Christian elements. Kwaku Boafo explains that he “observed Baptism and substituted Communion for Passover.”<sup>36</sup> And, while the Christian elements allowed Cherry to further separate his movement from Judaism, as he “castigated white Jews for rejecting Jesus,”<sup>37</sup> its acceptance of Christianity would wane as the Black Hebrew Israelite movement shifted away from the Christian-Judaism hybrid of the early twentieth century.

### **HISTORY OF HEBREW ISRAELITES IN NEW YORK**

The BHI movement today can trace its origin to Eber ben Yomin, also known as Abba Bivens who, “in the 1960’s broke away from the ‘Commandment Keepers,’ then the dominant mainstream black Jewish Organization,”<sup>38</sup> in order to establish his own sect. The sect, originally based in a Harlem apartment, eventually moved to a building on New York City’s 125 Street. Based on the location, the sect colloquially became known as One West. Sam Kestenbaum explains:

The One Westers saw themselves as radical reformers of earlier generations of Hebrew Israelites who had gone astray. They would troop out to street corners dressed in colorful and ornate capes and leather — vivid imaginings of what ancient Israelites might look like transported into the urban culture of New York City. They were also early and eager adopters of new media, hosting local television slots and filming their often-confrontational street ministry.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “History of Hebrew Israelism”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>

<sup>35</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.

<sup>36</sup> Kwaku Boafo, “The Star in the Banner: Studies on North American Black-Jewish Communities”(2009). *Ottawa Journal of Religion*, 136.

<sup>37</sup> Boafo, 136.

<sup>38</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “History of Hebrew Israelism”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial” *Washington Post*. January 22, 2019.

The colorful outfits became a prominent part of the sect's preaching, drawing attention to the sermons that they held on the streets. The usage of new media would ensure that the message of One West would reach as many potential adherents as possible. Radically, one of those messages was that Native Americans and Hispanics, along with African Americans, were descendants of Israel's tribes. According to some Israelite camps, this shift began when Bivens witnessed, on his way to New York, "many Indian reservations and came to the scriptural conclusion that the so-called Indians were Israelites as well."<sup>40</sup> In the eyes of Bivens, the difficulty of Native Americans was unique enough to equate it with life for African Americans in the United States, allowing them to be included in the Tribes. The hardships of African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics were thus all similarly attributable to straying away from the commandment of God. Only "by acknowledging their history as Israelites"<sup>41</sup> would issues like poverty and police violence be overcome. This also meant that those who rejected the history of the Israelites would themselves be rejected by One West. As a result, One West began rejecting groups like the Nation of Islam and the "pork-eating secularists of groups like the Black Panthers."<sup>42</sup>

In the 1990's, the sect began expanding on F.S Cherry's prophecy that Jesus Christ would "return to earth in 2000 to enslave and destroy the white race."<sup>43</sup> At that time, they believed, "the

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[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7).

<sup>40</sup> IUIIC "Brief Israelite History." <https://israelunite.org/brief-israelite-history/>.

<sup>41</sup> P.R. Lockhart "The Black Hebrew Israelites and their connection to the Covington controversy, explained." Vox. Jan 22, 2019

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/1/22/18193352/black-hebrew-israelites-covington-catholic-phillips-maga>.

<sup>42</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center "History of Hebrew Israelism"

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2015/history-hebrew-israelism>.

<sup>43</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center.

Israelites would assume their rightful places as rulers and the white man's time would come to a close."<sup>44</sup> However, as a result of doctrinal differences during this time, the sect began to splinter, with members breaking away to form their own BHI camps. This splintering became especially prominent when the year 2000 came and went, and Jesus did not arrive as One West had prophesized. The leaders of One West eventually rebranded the organization as the Israelite Church of God in Jesus Christ, and again, began pushing the prophecy that Jesus would return to kill or enslave all whites. The modern day leaders, however, have not set a specific date.

Today, many BHI camps have their roots directly from the One West school, particularly those camps within New York. While some of these camps may believe slightly varying doctrines, they share "some common beliefs, including a strong sense of black nationalism and an ardent belief in the end of the world being imminent."<sup>45</sup> The current camps share many of the same preaching strategies that began with the One Westers, from the colorful and ornate capes to the utilization of media to film and spread their street preaching. They preach the same narrative about the 12 Tribes of Israel, that the members are African American, Native American and Hispanic peoples. Today, the splintered camps of One West have spread internationally, transforming this New York City based movement into one shared by, conservatively, 40,000<sup>46</sup> people in the world.

## **INTRODUCTION TO THE ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST**

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<sup>44</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Who are the Black Israelites at the center of the viral standoff at the Lincoln Memorial" Washington Post. January 22, 2019.  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm\\_term=.41f8ba621cc7](https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/01/22/who-are-black-israelites-center-viral-standoff-lincoln-memorial/?utm_term=.41f8ba621cc7).

<sup>45</sup> P.R. Lockhart "The Black Hebrew Israelites and their connection to the Covington controversy, explained." Vox. Jan 22, 2019  
<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/1/22/18193352/black-hebrew-israelites-covington-catholic-phillips-maga>.

<sup>46</sup> Ryan Turner, "Black Hebrew Israelites" Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry.  
<https://carm.org/black-hebrew-israelitesr>.

Nathaniel Ray, born in the 1960's and raised in Harlem<sup>47</sup>, was drawn to alternative religions and spirituality at a young age.<sup>48</sup> He attended services in Baptist, Seventh-Day Adventist and the Jehovah's Witnesses Churches<sup>49</sup>, thereby covering a wide breadth of Christian beliefs.<sup>50</sup> But, it was his frustrations with what he felt like Christianity was *not* telling him that prompted his moving away from the faith. In particular, he felt that Christianity was hiding the fact that he, as a black man, was represented in the Bible. "I was destroyed mentally,"<sup>51</sup> said Nathaniel of the perceived deception. In 1990, he joined "an influential Israelite school in Harlem" known as One West,<sup>52</sup> which emphasized the identity of black people in the Bible. The sect would use their own version of Hebrew, a version that leaders said was an ancient version of the language, and gather in a small store-front church. There, members would read the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. More importantly for Nathaniel, the sect would emphasize the place of black people within the Bible. As part of this belonging to the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, Nathaniel adopted the surname Israel<sup>53</sup>, becoming Nathanyel Ben Israel. Of the

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II" *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

<sup>48</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace." *Forward* Forward.com October 2nd, 2017

<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>49</sup> The Baptist Church is a denomination of Protestant Christianity, named after its main belief in a person publicly choosing to proclaim their faith in Christ via baptism. The Seventh Day Adventist Church is a denomination of Protestant Christianity, distinguished by its observance of the Sabbath on Saturday, as well as following a doctrine called the 28 fundamental beliefs. Jehovah's Witnesses is an offshoot of Orthodox Christianity, known for its nontrinitarian views.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II." *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

<sup>51</sup> Paul.

<sup>52</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, "Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace." *Forward* Forward.com October 2nd, 2017

<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>

<sup>53</sup> Paul Williams, "Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part II." *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 13, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170513/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-ii>.

experience, Nathanyel said he felt transformed, “learning the Bible, that we [Black people] are the people of the book, that we do have a history.”<sup>54</sup> Eventually, disputes with leadership would have Nathanyel belong to a series of Israelite schools until in 2003, when he eventually started his own camp, Israel United in Christ (IUIC). The earliest meetings were held in his New York living room, with family and a small group of supporters as adherents.

Today, the IUIC has thousands of members, with at least 40 different communities in the United States.<sup>55</sup> From Dallas, Texas to Honolulu, Hawaii, IUIC members defer to Nathanyel, who they refer to as Elder Nathanyel or Bishop Nathanyel. The camp is ambitious in its growth, with Nathanyel attempting to expand the IUIC internationally. In the spring of 2018, members from the camp traveled to Liberia, in an attempt to convert Liberian citizens into Black Hebrew Israelites. The members preached at a Liberian church, the streets and appeared on a local radio. Nathanyel even spearheaded a meeting between the camp and a former warlord, General Butt Naked, seeing a relationship with Naked “as an opportunity to push their outreach farther into Africa using a man with a very public persona.”<sup>56</sup> Outside of Liberia, the camp has at least 7 other smaller established communities internationally, from Ghana to Amsterdam<sup>57</sup>.

Part of the success spreading both domestically and internationally can be attributed to the focus that IUIC gives its digital persona. The camp is active on multiple forms of social media, including Instagram and YouTube. YouTube especially seems to be an active source of

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<sup>54</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward Forward.com October 2nd, 2017  
<https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>55</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Black Nationalist”  
<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>.

<sup>56</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Courting Butt Naked: Israel United in Christ attempts to recruit former cannibal and leader of a Liberian child army” April 11, 2018  
<https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/04/11/courting-butt-naked-israel-united-christ-attempts-recruit-former-cannibal-and-leader>.

<sup>57</sup> IUIC “YouTube Channels Listing” <https://israelunite.org/youtube-channels-listing/>.

recruitment for the camp, with a separate page on the IUIC website listing the YouTube channels for the different communities. Likewise, many of the communities have their own individual Facebook pages<sup>58</sup>, with events tailored for that city, state or region. The different accounts however, do reiterate the unity of the IUIC. The accounts often include the main IUIC website on their contact info, as well as information on national IUIC Classrooms.

The ability to maintain a cohesive structure across the different communities has allowed IUIC to rise over other Black Hebrew Israelite camps. This cohesiveness can be attributed to Nathanyel, who “prides himself on the strict discipline maintained by his members.”<sup>59</sup> In an interview, he expanded on the unity and discipline of his camp, stating “There’s no other camp—I’m not knocking them—but...we understand about organization better than all the other camps.”<sup>60</sup> In particular, it is the hierarchical structure that Nathanyel established in IUIC that ensures a level of organization. There are the lay members, those who consider themselves part of the community and attend classrooms, and then there are the religious leaders. From lowest rank to highest rank, the religious hierarchy is Soldier, Officer, Captain, Deacons and Bishop/Elder.<sup>61</sup> The military-like titles are based both on scripture and the occupation of Nathanyel and many of his members, who “work in either law enforcement or security,”<sup>62</sup> to support the camp’s activities. The scripture in question is 2 Timothy 2:4 “No man that warreth

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<sup>58</sup> Here are two different IUIC chapter Facebook accounts, as evidence of the various IUIC communities and how they interact online. IUIC Hawaii, Facebook.com <https://www.facebook.com/IUICHawaii/> IUIC Atlanta, Facebook.com <https://www.facebook.com/iuicat/>.

<sup>59</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward.com October 2nd, 2017 <https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>60</sup> Kestenbaum.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Williams, “Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part I.” *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 6, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170506/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-i>

<sup>62</sup> Peter Rugh, “The Black Israelites Think Whites Are Possessed by the Devil” Vice May 1, 2014 [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/dpwyqz/white-people-black-jesus-will-enslave-you](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpwyqz/white-people-black-jesus-will-enslave-you).



entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier,”<sup>63</sup> reiterating the idea that IUIC needs soldiers not simply worshipers. The camp’s belief that they are engaging in religious conflict thus ensures an obligation to structure. While there is not much public information as to what the roles explicitly mean, the IUIC website indicates that there are seven Deacons and two elders, one of which is Nathanyel.<sup>64</sup>

Domestically, the United States is divided into three regions, the Western Region, the Midwest Region and the Eastern Region. Each region has at least three leaders, comprised of either Deacons, Captains or both.<sup>65</sup> All of the religious leadership is male.

### **ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST STREET PREACHING IN NEW YORK**

As a camp that began in a New York living room, the IUIC holds deep ties to the state. The national headquarters are in Mt. Vernon, New York, which hosts online classes for the thousands of IUIC members internationally. Like many of the Black Hebrew Israelite camps, IUIC is well known for its street preaching. While the headquarters are in Mt. Vernon, there are smaller communities preaching all over New York, from Queens to Harlem to Rochester.

Many of the IUIC street preachers follow the same pattern camp-wide for their preaching. A group of men gather around a section of the street, wearing the traditional purple robe-like clothing of the movement. They place down a series of posters and signs, sometimes a picture of Black Jesus, other times a poster explaining what the kingdom of Israel looks like and at times simply a provocative sign. One member, often a member of the religious hierarchy, holds a

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Williams, “Israel United in Christ Offers A Different Perspective-Part I.” *The Gleaner* Jamaica-gleaner.com May 6, 2017

<http://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20170506/israel-united-christ-offers-different-perspective-part-i>.

<sup>64</sup> IUIC “Bios” Israeliteunite.org

[https://israelunite.org/category/bios/?doing\\_wp\\_cron=1556229657.5220980644226074218750](https://israelunite.org/category/bios/?doing_wp_cron=1556229657.5220980644226074218750).

<sup>65</sup> IUIC “Contact Israel United in Christ” <https://israelunite.org/contact-us/>.

microphone and begins preaching, eventually targeting certain pedestrians. In a video dated October 12, 2018, a Captain named Zephaniah of the IUIC camp in Harlem, begins targeting a black woman. He explains to her, with a microphone in his hand, that his people (the ethnicities of the 12 Tribes of Israel), do not understand that they are the greatest people on Earth. Zephaniah elaborates that his camp has the patience to teach his people this fact, which is why IUIC Harlem comes to the same spot every Sabbath “to teach our people with patience.”<sup>66</sup> The exchange continues with Zephaniah occasionally pointing at the IUIC member next to him, periodically giving him the microphone so that the member may read from the scripture. To the woman, Zephaniah begins asking questions about her lifestyle, such as whether her hair is naturally that color. When the woman mentions that it is dyed, he begins telling her that her natural hair is that of Jesus and God. The color that she has chosen however, a yellow like color, is that of the “oppressor,”<sup>67</sup> effectively pushing her away from God and closer to the oppressors, the Caucasians.

The interaction demonstrates one of the functions of street preaching by the IUIC. That is, to directly interact with members of the 12 Tribes of Israel who they believe, have not yet understood the word of God. The coordinated uniforms, provocative posters and microphones ensures that they are difficult to ignore. Having one person preach, while another sits to the side ready to read out a verse from the scripture provides them with an air of legitimacy. It creates a persona of religious knowledge, painting them as individuals merely reading out the word of God rather than providing their own interpretation of it. Being on the streets rather than in an

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<sup>66</sup> IUIC Harlem “The Israelites: Preaching To The Church of Harlem.” Youtube.com October 12,2018 22:00 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOiH0gMFJrg>.

<sup>67</sup> IUIC Harlem ““The Israelites: Preaching To The Church of Harlem.” 23:00.

enclosed space, such as a temple or a mosque, ensures that the IUIIC members are speaking to as many people as possible. They do not run the risk of preaching to the choir, but rather are guaranteed a new crop of listeners and potential adherents every day. Once an audience is attracted, targeting certain individuals not only draws that targeted person closer, but allows for the scripture to be directly applied to everyday life. As with the case of the woman in Harlem, she—and her bystanders—were able to hear how something as simple as hair is evidence of ties with God, learning that the choice to dye her hair was an act defying God.

Not all preaching sessions, however, go as smoothly as Zephaniah's. In a video dated November 23, 2013, an Officer named Levi is discussing why interracial relationships cannot occur under the scripture. Primarily he argues, it is because "these nations, they hate us as a people. Why? Because you so called Blacks and Hispanics are the children of God."<sup>68</sup> This line of argument angers one of the audience members, who objects to the divisions that the IUIIC members seem to be establishing. The objector begins to argue when a Deacon by the name of Yawasap steps in. Yawasap begins antagonizing the objector, asking him "are you going to say something and run like a Christian or are you going to stand here and listen?"<sup>69</sup> The two begin to argue and Yawasap criticizes the objector's faith once again, "these dumb Christians don't know anything, reading the Bible and don't know what the hell he's reading, he don't even know who he is."<sup>70</sup> By this point, Yawasap is no longer addressing the objector, but rather the other audience members. The remainder of the video shows the objector and the IUIIC members attempting to yell over one another as they speak to different pedestrians.

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<sup>68</sup> IUIICQueensCamp "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." Youtube.com November 23rd, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HLb2zyvV194> 0:13.

<sup>69</sup> IUIICQueensCamp, "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." 3:30.

<sup>70</sup> IUIICQueensCamp, "The Foolish Unlearned Christians of Queens New York." 5:00.

While this showcases a different preaching strategy than the one utilized by Zephaniah, it still serves an important function for the IUIIC. Establishing an antagonist, in this case the Christian man, brings to life the religious conflict that the members allude to in the scripture. They become soldiers for their faith, combatting the heresy that is propagated by the others. Their strength in numbers lessens the chance that they lose that conflict and presents to the audience a unified front of the religious war. Even publishing the conflict online serves to further this sense of religious conflict. The title of the video “The Foolish Unlearned Christian of Queens New York,” has already established to the viewer that the objector has lost. The IUIIC have seemingly come out victorious, their faith carrying them to victory. Only by street preaching does the IUIIC gain access to a consistent set of antagonists. Street preaching also provides them with a higher chance of winning the religious conflicts, as their enemies are less likely to come prepared. This form of preaching becomes more than just about gaining supporters but rather, delegitimizing the opposition in a way that traditional preaching methods cannot achieve. It becomes a reinforcing mechanism for IUIIC members themselves, providing them with the satisfaction that they are on the right side.

### **ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST ONLINE PREACHING**

IUIIC is particularly known for its “slick social media campaigns and professional quality videos.”<sup>71</sup> The main IUIIC YouTube page, IUIICintheClassRooms, is filled with high production value footage, helping to explain the page’s 70,000 subscribers and over 10 million views.<sup>72</sup> One of the more recent videos, published April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2019, showcases the camp’s level of media

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<sup>71</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Hebrew Israelite Leader Warns Kendrick Lamar Against Public Embrace.” Forward Forward.com October 2nd, 2017 <https://forward.com/news/383237/spiritual-leader-says-kendrick-lamar-shouldnt-be-tied-to-hebrew-israelites/>.

<sup>72</sup> IUIICintheClassRoom <https://www.youtube.com/user/IUIICintheClassRoom/about>.

professionalism. The video begins with a soundtrack and a transparent line at the bottom letting viewers know that the soundtrack is “Fair Use and is allowed for purposes of criticism, news reporting, teaching and parody.”<sup>73</sup> Above the fair use announcement is the IUIC logo and the different platforms that the IUIC is active on. Immediately after this introduction flashes a warning, letting viewers know that the video is for educational purposes only, as well as the legal code that provides limitations on exclusive rights.<sup>74</sup> This beginning alone indicates an organization that is familiar with legal stature, as well as their rights under the law as it relates to copyright. It places the camp as more than just a rag-tag group of preachers but, rather, as professionals spreading a message.

The April 19<sup>th</sup> video is titled “The Time, Death & Resurrection of Christ | Part 1 of 3,” and has a run time of one hour and nineteen minutes. It presents a panel of three Deacons discussing the scripture as it relates to Christ. This form of preaching is fairly common amongst religious communities – that is, simply presenting information to the congregation. In the case of IUIC, this video replaces a traditional religious gathering. Rather than having members physically present, different communities worldwide become part of a digital congregation. The online format allows for some key advantages. Logistically, adherents are able to follow along with the sermons more effectively. They are able to pause and rewind the video for clarification and the video itself is designed to be user-friendly. Each verse mentioned in the video is given a tagline with where to find the verse, including the bible version utilized.<sup>75</sup> This allows adherents to follow along with the Deacons, providing them with a deeper insight into the verse in

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<sup>73</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3” April 19, 2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d319vSo53xQ&t=454s> 0:00.

<sup>74</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3 0:37.

<sup>75</sup> IUICintheClassRoom “#IUIC| The TIME, DEATH & RESSURECTION OF CHRIST| PART 1 OF 3 42:56. This is just one example of the tagline.

question. The second advantage is the consistency of the message that IUIC is relaying to its adherents. Rather than rely on the existence of dozens of congregations worldwide, with each preacher relaying a different message to their members, the IUIC centralizes the mass. Each member, whether they be in Amsterdam or Atlanta, receives the same teaching and understanding of scripture. Finally, this centralization of the congregation ensures that members feel part of the IUIC community. Members are listening to the same teachings by the same individual and to that, there is a sense of unity. It allows for the camp to not only grow but to maintain a sense of connection with the headquarters in New York.

Some of the IUIC preaching, however, is not entirely traditional. A popular form of preaching for this camp is music videos, in particular, rap songs. One song, titled “IUIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video,” serves as an introduction to what the camp touches upon. The song mentions that classes are seven days a week, creates distinctions between IUIC and other Black Hebrew Israelite camps, and even includes various footage of the camp’s street preaching. The video was fairly popular, with over 500,000 views<sup>76</sup>, a testament to its high-quality. While a bit unorthodox, this form of preaching is not entirely uncommon within different religious communities. Evangelical Christians, for instance, commonly infuse popular culture with their preaching. What is unique about IUIC however, is how prominently entertainment features in preaching efforts for the camp. In one prominent case, Kendrick Lamar, an extremely successful hip hop artist, posted lyrics pushing forth IUIC ideology. In his album “Damn,” Lamar includes a voicemail reciting Black Hebrew Israelite doctrine, as well as the line “I’m an Israelite, don’t call

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<sup>76</sup> Original Royalty “IUIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video” May 25, 2016  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX\\_wI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX_wI).

me black no more.”<sup>77</sup> He was influenced to include those lines by his cousin Karni Ben Israel, a member of IUIIC who had been teaching Lamar personal Bible sessions. Together, they came up with the idea of including Israelite references.<sup>78</sup>

Utilizing entertainment is a critical strategy for the IUIIC. It allows the camp access to a large number of people, regardless of their interest in the message. Whether it be the music of Kendrick Lamar or “IUIIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video,” the camp has been able to access millions of people. Of course, these two albums and songs are not the only media that the camp has created. Outside of national headquarters, many of the smaller communities create their own music videos, with varying levels of professionalism. Each of these videos, regardless of popularity, serves similar purposes. They allow the camp to reach young individuals and begin preaching to their sense of belonging. The image of the IUIIC becomes that of a young person’s camp, one in which adherents make music videos and have fun doing so. It humanizes the camp, letting viewers know that while they may be devout, that is but one aspect of their identity. Viewers can easily forget they are listening to a form of preaching and instead, dance along to the music. This impact establishes the videos as a universal form of preaching, appealing to a wide range of backgrounds. The videos therefore can become a gateway for those interested in the camp as evident by the “IUIIC” video which, like many of the IUIIC music videos, includes in its description links to the main IUIIC website, other videos, podcasts and even a link to buy the T-shirts in the video.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “Kendrick Lamar ‘Not Committed’ To Cousin’s Hebrew Israelite Group” 21 May 2017. Forward. <https://forward.com/news/372531/kendrick-lamar-not-committed-to-cousins-hebrew-israelite-group/>.

<sup>78</sup> Sam Kestenbaum, “How Kendrick Lamar Was ‘Blown Away’ by Hebrew Israelite Beliefs” 9 May 2017 <https://forward.com/news/371315/how-kendrick-lamar-was-blown-away-by-hebrew-israelite-beliefs/>.

<sup>79</sup> Original Royalty “IUIIC: Purple Reign Official Music Video” May 25, 2016 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX\\_wI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgeTbEWX_wI).

The emphasis on youth outreach is one example of why the IUIC is so effective in its online preaching efforts. That is, the camp actively attempts to target different populations using media outlets. For women, that outreach is through an online magazine called *The Daughters of Sarah*. *The Daughters of Sarah* hosts a number of different topics, from family to fashion to beauty. Each of the categories in some way reiterates the beliefs of IUIC members, ensuring that members follow the scripture. The family section, for instance, highlights the “natural order” of the family. The verse posted is 1 Corinthians 11:3: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.”<sup>80</sup> As a result of the natural order, the message from the Bishop’s Wife at the bottom of the homepage makes it clear that the “website is under the leadership, structure, and discipline of the men of Israel United in Christ.”<sup>81</sup> That being said, the magazine is intended to be appealing to traditional gender roles of women. There are interviews with different women from the camp, cooking recipes and even quizzes about the scripture. The purpose of the magazine is clear, both to establish a sense of community within the women of IUIC and to also ensure that they too understand the scripture. Unlike the other forms of preaching, which can be more external and focused on bringing people in, the magazine is a more internal attitude towards preaching. It attempts to teach the women of the IUIC their place within the camp, while also creating a community within that place. The three different forms of preaching, digital congregation, music videos and magazines, are not the only online forms that IUIC utilizes. However, they provide an understanding of how nuanced the IUIC preaching strategy is. As nuanced as the preaching strategy is, however, the center of IUIC’s message becomes a sense of community.

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<sup>80</sup> The Daughters of Sarah “Titus 1:6-7” <https://thedaughtersofSarah.com/Family.html>.

<sup>81</sup> The Daughters of Sarah “Shalom and Welcome Daughters of Sarah” <https://thedaughtersofSarah.com/index.html>.



## INTRODUCTION TO AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST

Not much is known about Alpha Omega Clan, more commonly known as Ambassadors of Christ (AOC), a fairly small BHI camp based in Brooklyn, New York<sup>82</sup>. The camp is run by the charismatic General HaShar, who pushes his members into adopting a battle-like attitude towards preaching. In an interview, he explains that “the war-like dress and titles they [AOC] use are based on a biblical call to arms, including the omnipresent star, or ‘shield,’ of David on their garments.”<sup>83</sup> The secrecy surrounding the camp is intentional, as HaShar believes that “anything they say about themselves personally will detract from their mission.”<sup>84</sup>

What is known about HaShar is that he grew up in Brooklyn, coming from “what sounded like [an] extremely religious Christian household.”<sup>85</sup> Before the first Gulf War<sup>86</sup>, he served in the military, which gave him “insight into the military and the ways of the United States that only ‘a veteran’ could ever possess.”<sup>87</sup> His military background could explain the titles that AOC members often hold, such as Lieutenant<sup>88</sup> and Captain<sup>89</sup>. Other titles are more traditionally religious, including Chief Priest Star<sup>90</sup> and Priest Officer<sup>91</sup>. While it is unclear what the hierarchy of the all-male leadership is, it is evident that HaShar is the leader of the camp.

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<sup>82</sup> Southern Poverty Law Center “Black Nationalist”

<https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/black-nationalist>.

<sup>83</sup> Thrasher, Steven “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>84</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>85</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>86</sup> The first Gulf War, also known as the Persian Gulf War, began on January 16, 1991.

<sup>87</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Timothe. Facebook.com The post showcases one of the titles that a member can hold is Lieutenant. <https://bit.ly/2ILw61b>.

<sup>89</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com May 22, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Captain. <https://bit.ly/2GOLaj>.

<sup>90</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com. May 27, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Chief Priest Star. <https://bit.ly/2vq8eYy>.

<sup>91</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook.com. May 22nd, 2018. The post showcases that one of the titles a member can hold is Priest Officer. <https://bit.ly/2GFDdF9>.

It is noteworthy that descriptions of HaShar refer to him as the leader, rather than the founder of AOC. And while it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the camp first came into being, a Facebook post from February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019 captioned “A.O.C MEGA Classic 464 1998 HaShar x Chaazaq Rawchaa” offers some insight. The video shows a young HaShar sitting down in front of a Star of David, preaching the scripture of BHI. While there is no evidence in the video that AOC was around during that period, as the logo in the back differs from the AOC logo today, the video highlights the years that HaShar has been part of the BHI movement.

Reports definitively show that AOC has been around since at least 2011, as evidenced by news reports.<sup>92</sup> For most of their history, the camp has remained largely focused on street preaching in New York, particularly in Time Square. HaShar, however, has recently become more active domestically, traveling with his camp to D.C and Atlanta<sup>93, 94</sup>, among other cities. While the purpose of the travels is unclear, one function seems to be expanding the AOC camp domestically. Most recently, the Ambassadors of Christ Facebook page showcased the members of A.O.C Houston, encouraging individuals in Houston and the greater Texas Area to be a part of the community.<sup>95</sup>

Digitally, AOC has not had the same sort of expansions that it seems to be doing in person. While the camp is active on Facebook, the page only has 1,117 likes, with post engagement typically less than a hundred Facebook reactions (often a mixture of likes, loves and

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<sup>92</sup> Steven Thrasher, “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>93</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, August 11, 2018. Facebook post showing that AOC would be in D.C for the “White Civil Rights” Rally <https://bit.ly/2Gvn5Ws>.

<sup>94</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, January 29, Facebook post showing General HaShar in Atlanta. He is the individual hunched over. <https://bit.ly/2IILGL7>.

<sup>95</sup> Ambassadors of Christ. March 2nd, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2L60HJ4>.

sad reacts).<sup>96</sup> The Instagram page seems to be now defunct, with the only other form of online media being YouTube. The YouTube channel is the most effective, with over 1.7 million views and over 13,000 subscribers.<sup>97</sup> Most of the YouTube channel is simply clips of the AOC street preaching, though there are some lectures posted.

### **AMBASSADORS OF CHRIST STREET PREACHING IN NEW YORK**

AOC is infamous for the provocative methods utilized during their street preaching. During the Obama administration, the camp would carry a cardboard sign of the former president with “the phrases ‘AfriaCON Monkey Devil’ and ‘Illuminati Puppet’ accompany[ing] Obama’s smiling Senate portrait, along with horns they’ve drawn coming out of his head.”<sup>98</sup> Another sign, “Charla Nash, the woman whose face was ripped off by Travis the Chimp, [was] juxtaposed with Emmett Till’s mutilated body.”<sup>99</sup> The signs were chosen because of their provocative nature, succeeding in drawing a crowd of horrified on-lookers. These signs, however, were not the most provocative tool in the AOC toolbox.

In a video titled “A.O.C. Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew,” HaShar is describing to a group of onlookers why the “Jew” of today is not a “real Jew.” He points to one of his members, who is standing with a copy of the scripture, and has the member read from Deuteronomy 28:6. HaShar focuses on the line “and there you shall be sold,”<sup>100</sup> arguing that “the so-called white man who call themselves a Jew, he was never been sold to anybody. In fact, they

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<sup>96</sup> Ambassadors of Christ, Facebook page. The like count is as of the time of writing, April 26, 2019. <https://bit.ly/2DBRGB9>.

<sup>97</sup> Alpha Omega Clan YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0vUBuYsGf0qqkeXtdpuKPg/featured>.

<sup>98</sup> Steven Thrasher, “Black Hebrew Israelites: New York’s Most Obnoxious Prophets” March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

<sup>99</sup> Thrasher.

<sup>100</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” August 22, 2018. 1:56 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xRyvmRZDwms>.

were slave merchants who owned slave ships and slave ports.”<sup>101</sup> He goes on to explain that the “so-called Jews” own “every sector of media, every sector of the jewels and the gold.”<sup>102</sup> The video continues with HaShar explaining why his camp is out on the streets, in order to “to do what the most high says... to call my people.”<sup>103</sup> The clip culminates with HaShar pointing at a white man and yelling “Every Black and Hispanic man standing here with this bastard in front of you, you all been punked. You all been punked man, so now do as you will and as you wish when he goes down the block. Beat his ass, beat his ass.”<sup>104</sup>

This video is not unique in terms of the intense language utilized by AOC members. The footage however, is particularly useful, as HaShar provides insight into why his camp is so adamant in their preaching. His preaching is more than just for the sake of God, he believes that it was *ordered* by God. In his eyes, he has a religious obligation to reach the greatest number of people, a goal easily attainable by being provocative. To “call my people”<sup>105</sup> requires a different skillset than converting people, which does not seem to be HaShar’s goal in many of these videos. Converting people would require engaging in discussion with the non-converted, attempting to persuade and draw them in. Instead, HaShar and his camp utilize provocative language to force others to hear them, a tactic more effective than any megaphone. Instead of utilizing the language of forgiveness and reconciliation used by many religious communities, language easily dismissed by those engaged with their everyday lives, he introduces decisiveness to bring forth a crowd. As to the comments regarding Jewish people, it serves to both inform as well as challenge. In terms of informing, it elaborates to the crowds how AOC is distinct from

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<sup>101</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 2:05.

<sup>102</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 3:30.

<sup>103</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 7:50.

<sup>104</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 9:04.

<sup>105</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 7:50.

contemporary Jewish communities. That is, those Jewish groups are “not real Jews” and delegitimate in the eyes of AOC. At the same time, the anti-Semitic comments serve to establish the framework for the religious conflict that AOC members find themselves in. They are David, fighting the Goliath that is the “every sector of media, every sector of the jewels and the gold.”<sup>106</sup> This conflict is crystalized when HaShar points to the white man and tells the crowd to “beat his ass.” He sees himself as the commander of a religious army, and his preaching mirrors that. It is not so much a sermon but a war cry, rallying the troops that he hopes come to his side.

That being said, it would be disingenuous to paint the AOC preaching strategy as only combative. There are times when members, even HaShar, engage in a back and forth conversation with audience members, seemingly with the intention to enlighten. In a video titled “A.O.C Israelites Ahban Ahrayah & HaShar vs The 44<sup>th</sup> Street Clowns Joker & Harley Quinn,” a protestor is visibly angry at the arguments made by AOC. He walks back and forth through the audience that has circled the AOC preachers, screaming profanities at the preachers. Another man, a teacher, speaks to the HaShar and explains that while much of what he says is truth, “there can be no decisiveness between our kids,”<sup>107</sup> referencing the decisive language that HaShar utilizes. To this point, HaShar goes and shakes the man’s hand, telling him that it is a beautiful point. He counters, however, that “we [black people] are the only people that have the capacity, always ha[ve] ... to accept all.”<sup>108</sup> He elaborates on his point, mentioning that it is the melanin that allows people to have that capacity for love, but that white people do not have that melanin and thus, do not have that capacity. The teacher periodically goes to shake HaShar’s

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<sup>106</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 3:30.

<sup>107</sup> Alpha Omega Clan, “A.O.C Israelites Ahban Ahrayah & HaShar vs The 44th Street Clowns Joker & Harley Quinn” December 8th, 2017. 17:05 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILwUfWgEvy0&t=1086s>.

<sup>108</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 17:15.

hand and hug him, with HaShar praising “the Most High.”<sup>109</sup> While the interaction is somewhat positive, the protestor is all but ignored by the camp for the time being. The footage highlights that, yes, there are positive interactions with the AOC members, but those interactions are limited to individuals who are receptive to the camp’s ideals. Those who disagree are either ignored or shouted down.

In a way, the AOC strategy seems to be preaching to a choir. They are not attempting to convince others to join their camp but rather, telling them of God’s words to his people as well as his wrath. Those who will listen and abide are welcome, whereas those who will not are to be damned. The AOC preaching strategy is not necessarily an attempt to expand their number but instead, to expand the influence of their ideas onto society. This distinction explains why the camp is so focused on being combative towards individuals outside the 12 Tribes, as AOC members see no obligation to treat them with any form of respect. Their preaching strategy is solely centered on spreading the word of God as they understand it, including spreading the anger of God to any not of the 12 Tribes.

### **COMPARING THE PREACHING STRATEGIES OF AMBASSASORS OF CHRIST AND ISRAEL UNITED IN CHRIST**

While both AOC and IUIC are members of the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, their preaching strategies differ vastly. The differences do not arise from scripture, but instead from their respective goals as BHI camps. The AOC is primarily focused on maintaining unity amongst its members, emphasizing the idea that adherents are engaged in a religious conflict. In contrast, IUIC is currently emphasizing international growth and is attempting to target its

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<sup>109</sup> Alpha Omega Clan. “A.O.C Israelites General HaShar Real Jew vs Fake Jew.” 18:50.

message to a wide range of audiences. That is not to say that AOC is not aiming to expand, as is evident by the new Houston community, nor does it mean that IUIC does believe it is engaging in a religious conflict, evident by the camp's belief that it needs soldiers. However, it is clear that the two camps have different overarching priorities.

There are, however, some key similarities between the two camps that influence their preaching. Firstly, both camps seem to have been derived from the One West sect. In the case of IUIC leader, Nathanyel, he is explicit about the fact that he was at one time a member. In many ways, he maintains the traditions taught to him in the school, as his preachers often wear colorful robes and command an understanding of the Hebrew language. Like One West, IUIC is prolific in its usage of media to spread its message and similarly adamant about preaching on the streets. As to HaShar, while it is unclear whether he was officially part of the sect, his timeline in the BHI movement would indicate so. He was a member of the movement in 1998, when One West was still propagating its theory of the reemergence of Jesus, and his residency in New York City would make the connection probable. Regardless of his personal connection, it is clear that AOC has drawn on many of the traditions of One West. AOC members are seen actively preaching in the streets, with HaShar often wearing a black robe-like outfit. This said, the biggest indicator that both AOC and IUIC are off-shoots of the One West sect is that both camps include Native Americans and Hispanics as part of the 12 Tribes of Israel.

Another similarity is the cult of personality created within the camps. For AOC, the driving force is HaShar, whose outbursts provide the camp with its outsized infamous reputation. HaShar's persona is crucial to AOC preaching, evident by the number of AOC members who mimic his preaching strategy. The smaller size of AOC ensures that HaShar remains critical to

the camp's identity, for he is the one who goes around the country, bringing others into his camp and under his wing. His bombastic personality serves to shape the culture of AOC, driving the camp further and further into a combative spirit. Likewise, Nathanyel's personality is a big part of the IUIC preaching culture, particularly as the founder of the camp. It is his understanding of BHI that gets communicated worldwide, whether it be through videos of his preaching or who he chooses to be part of leadership. Nathanyel's presence looms prominently in the website and, as was the case in Liberia, has him serve as the camp's ambassador. The way he chooses to preach becomes an important factor for the different IUIC communities. The difference between HaShar and Nathanyel, however, is that HaShar's camp is still too small to really come up with a preaching culture independent of the general. To a large degree, the AOC *is* HaShar. Though this much is subject to change with the establishment of AOC Houston, at present his preaching strategy is AOC's strategy. By contrast, regardless of how central of a figure Nathanyel is to IUIC, he is only one individual. The different communities of the IUIC domestically and internationally will naturally begin to develop their own preaching strategies, adapted to the region and people. This development is not an indictment of Nathanyel's preaching strategy, which is largely focused on expanding, but rather evidence of his success.

It is interesting to note that both HaShar and Nathanyel come from security-like backgrounds, HaShar from the military and Nathanyel a former NYPD detective.<sup>110</sup> The way in which they utilize those respective backgrounds highlights a key difference between the two camps. For Nathanyel, a law enforcement background is predominately used to ensure that his camp is structured. It encourages the hierarchy he established in IUIC and creates a sense of

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<sup>110</sup> Kendrick Lamar's 'Damn' References To Hebrew Israelites Have A Family Connection. April 24, 2017 <https://genius.com/a/kendrick-lamar-s-damn-references-to-hebrew-israelites-have-a-family-connection>.



unity within the different communities. Nathanyel's background, however, does not seem to significantly influence his preaching. While he and his camp *do* focus on the idea that the movement needs "soldiers," that seems to be more of a result of BHI teachings than Nathanyel's law enforcement background. The IUIC's nuanced approach to preaching makes it clear that the "soldier" angle is but one aspect of their preaching. Other more prominent aspects revolve around the establishment of a global IUIC community, which necessitates a softer form of preaching more accessible to a larger population. For HaShar, however, his military persona is critical to the way that he, and thus his camp, preaches. The first evidence of this is the title that HaShar chose for himself. Rather than be called an Elder or a Bishop, he chose General, situating himself as the commander of a religious army. His preaching strategy is largely combative, focused on not only bringing the word of God to his people but bringing the wrath of God to his enemies. His calls to attack the white man during his preaching highlight that, for him, attacking the enemy is one of the aims of preaching. The IUIC, however, is more diverse in the way it chooses to preach. While there is a sense of combativeness, it is used more sparingly than a camp like the AOC. Thus, it would be unlikely to see an IUIC member actively call for attacking a member of the audience.

What IUIC does rely on heavily, however, is an online presence to preach. The music videos, live classrooms and digital magazines all indicate that, for IUIC, the digital space is a priority. The music videos, for instance, ensure that as many people as possible become familiar with the camp and ideally, research more into their practices. In the case of AOC, however, the comparative lack of a social media presence indicates a different reality for the camp. AOC is more focused on unifying the camp together, purely for the sake of God rather than for the sake

of expanding. This can be seen in HaShar's reluctance to give his personal name, arguing that to do so would "detract from their mission."<sup>111</sup> His focus is not on reaching out to individuals and having them become part of the camp, but rather, on including those who are already willing to dedicate themselves to his cause. This could also explain why, rather than use social media to grow, it is HaShar himself who is travelling across the country. Traveling creates an almost vetting process for new members, setting a bar for who can and cannot become part of the AOC. This much can even be seen in the AOC YouTube channel, with provocative titles to their videos serving both to boost views and to make clear the kind of person AOC is looking for. Nathanyel, on the other hand, utilizes both his physical presence as well as the digital space to include others into the camp. Using entertainment videos for instance, serves to humanize the IUIIC camp and make it seem more welcoming for members. Even the language of his website, designating members as "family," reiterates that the camp is a community that one can belong to. The difference between the two camps boils down to this; while the IUIIC is looking for recruits, the AOC is looking for soldiers. As a result, the IUIIC preaching becomes seemingly more welcoming while AOC is more directly combative.

The preaching strategies of the two camps are thus intentionally different because of the camps' varying goals. For a camp like IUIIC, focused on expanding, it would be ineffective to prioritize a combative form of preaching. Such preaching serves to alienate those who could potentially be members. For a camp like AOC, focused on creating a family of adherents, it makes more sense to target various populations and draw them in, whether it be through music videos or magazines. And while IUIIC has stated the BHI movement needs soldier's, the IUIIC

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<sup>111</sup> Thrasher, Steven "Black Hebrew Israelites: New York's Most Obnoxious Prophets" March 30, 2011 The Village Voice <https://www.villagevoice.com/2011/03/30/black-hebrew-israelites-new-yorks-most-obnoxious-prophets/>.

website's emphasis on community shows that what IUIC needs is a community. A camp like AOC, on the other hand, cannot prioritize the "call of God" by putting its efforts on expanding. It needs to ensure that the personal does not detract from the mission and so will not prioritize concerns of alienation. Instead, camps like AOC need to be provocative both to spread their message to the 12 Tribes but also, to punish those who they perceive as working against the Tribes.

## **CONCLUSION**

While Israel United in Christ and Ambassadors of Christ are both within the Black Hebrew Israelites movement, their camp ambitions and understandings are vastly different. Israel United in Christ seems to be emphasizing a worldwide BHI community, explaining the intense efforts they take to maintain a social media presence. The Ambassadors of Christ, on the other hand, are more focused on spreading the word of God, including his wrath. As a result, they take to the streets, where they can encounter both their people and the enemies of God. The camps are both members of the BHI movement but are anything but monolithic in their attitudes.

The ambitions of both camps highlight key questions about the future of the BHI movement: As Israel United in Christ expands internationally, what effect will that have on their understanding of the scripture? Will the camp begin to adapt in order to attract more members, or will it maintain some of the decisive language it utilizes? And, if Israel United in Christ expands and becomes the face of the BHI movement globally, how will different audiences react?

As to the Ambassadors of Christ, will they be able to maintain the combative spirit that the members are known for as the camp grows? Will a camp that is as small as theirs maintain power in the broader BHI movement, or will they become the fringe sect of a fringe movement?

What these questions crystalize is that there is still much to learn about the Black Hebrew Israelite movement, especially as the movement begins to grow in size. The Ambassador of Christ and the Israel United in Christ are but two camps of a movement that includes anywhere from 40,000-200,000 people. It is critical that researchers take the time to distinguish between the different camps, while differentiating between the religious movement and the actions of certain members, such as those in the Lincoln Memorial controversy. It is my hope that in highlighting the different preaching strategies of Ambassadors of Christ and Israel United in Christ, I offer some insight into this still unknown movement.

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