

# **THE BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITES AND KANSAS**

By Jerry Klinger



**Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthews**

“And the LORD said to them, "Now listen to what I say:  
 "If there were prophets among you, I, the LORD,  
 would reveal myself in visions. I would speak to them in dreams”.

Numbers 12:6

St. Mary’s County, Maryland: William Saunders Crowdy was born August 11, 1847. He was born a slave. His father, Basil Crowdy, was a deeply religious Christian who oversaw the drying of clay on the plantation. Crowdy was raised with the family knowledge that he was descended from the ancient kings of the Ndongo Empire. His ancestor was captured by Portuguese slavers.

Crowdy was unusual. It was illegal for slaves to read but he learned to read the Bible. He was particularly engaged by the Hebrew prophets and the role of Elijah. When he was severely abused by an overseer, Crowdy prayed to Moses to deliver him. Crowdy was *delivered* from the abusive slave master.

Ten years after his miraculous delivery from the overseer, the Civil War was a reality. At Crowdy’s first opportunity he ran away from the plantation and joined the Union army to fight for his and the freedom of all slaves. Crowdy was 16. He enlisted in the 19<sup>th</sup> Maryland Colored Troops and saw action at the Battle of the Wilderness and outside of Petersburg. Crowdy remained in the army becoming a Buffalo Soldier with the fifth Cavalry. He rose to the rank of quartermaster sergeant and was honorably discharged in 1872.

Crowdy eventually settled down in Guthrie, Oklahoma, following a career as a cook on the Santa Fe Railroad. He married and raised a family. In Guthrie, Crowdy was very successful. He

was one of the largest Black farmers in the area, with nearly 100 acres of land. He was a pillar of his community, and a member of the Baptist church.

September 13, 1892, was the date of the first vision that Crowdy spoke of. *God* had come to him in the field and told him to lead his people, the Black people, to the *True Religion*. He was to redeem *Israel* out of spiritual and mental bondage. The vision confused him. He asked *God* for more time, resisting the vision.

The Civil War was very fresh in former slave minds. The Biblical imagery of the Children of Israel being liberated by God, with a strong hand from bondage, and Moses as their leader, was well known and often repeated. The slave world had ended but the world of Black enslavement under prejudice, bigotry and hatred was never far from the American Black experience.

Three years later, in 1895, Crowdy was chopping wood when again he had a vision. He said of the vision, "it was like the sound of rushing birds." The second vision terrified him. The vision told him "Run for your life". He ran to the woods. It was deep in the woods that God revealed the vision of what he must do. It was in the woods that William Crowdy became the "Prophet", a title and designation that he was known by until he died.

God showed the "Prophet" a little book and instructed him to "eat it up." Crowdy said, "In my mouth, it was as sweet as honey, but in my belly, it was bitter as gall." It was a reference from Ezekiel 3:1 "Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel." God promised Crowdy to "make his forehead strong against their forehead." Again it was a reference from Ezekiel 3:9, I will make your forehead like the hardest stone, harder than flint. Do not be afraid of them or terrified by them, though they are a rebellious house."

*God*, according to Crowdy, proceeded to reveal *his Ancient Plan of Salvation* in a fresh vision.

Crowdy was seated alone in a little room. Tables descended before him. Each table was inscribed with a name of a religious denomination. Each table was filthy as if covered with vomit. Finally, a small table came down. The table was clean and white. On the table was inscribed a name, the "Church of God and Saints of Christ." When the table touched the ground in front of him, he could see it was richly laden with wonderful things. The table expanded in size until it crowded out of the room all the other filthy tables.

Crowdy understood and accepted his mission. He understood what he was to do. He was to establish the Church of God and Saints of Christ. His mission was to spread the word of Salvation.

Crowdy was to gather the lost Ten Tribes of Israel. He was to show them, to teach them, to guide and lead them back to the Biblical prophetic truths of Sabbath (Saturday) observance, the Passover, the Hebrew Calendar, the Day of Atonement and most importantly the revelations from Sinai – the Ten Commandments.

He was tasked as he said, *"I teach my people to love one another, keep the Ten Commandments, pay their honest debts, and abstain from alcohol and tobacco."*

Who were the Ten Lost Tribes? Where were they? What happened to them since the Assyrian Exile more than two thousand years earlier?

The search for the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel had consumed many men and lives over the millennia. Columbus, on his early voyages, brought along Jews who had been forcibly baptized to act as interpreters to the Natives in the New World whom he thought might be from the Ten Lost Tribes. American popular culture, through the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, seriously considered the American Indian as being members of the Ten Lost Tribes.

In Crowdy's vision, the Ten Lost Tribes were the Black Men of Africa, especially the former slaves of the United States. The Black former slave was the true inheritor of Israel and the Promised Land, not the modern Jews.

Jesus was a prophet but not God.

Crowdy's mission was as a *Rabbi*. A Rabbi is a teacher. Crowdy was to teach the American Black man to keep the Ten Commandments, to love one another, to pay their honest debts and abstain from alcohol and tobacco. They were to be self-reliant, stand on their own feet economically, and work to improve themselves. They were to "eat the best, wear the best and be the best." It was a vision very similar to the guidance of one of the dominant Black leaders of America at the time, Booker T. Washington, the founder of the famed Tuskegee Institute.

A fundamental difference for Crowdy was his message of Black Nationalism, Black affirmation and positive identity independent of the White man's world. The Black people were the Chosen people. They had been oppressed, suppressed and enslaved by the White Man. The Black people were the true nation of Israel and the inheritors of God's blessing. Crowdy's message was no longer dependent upon the White Man's God or identity for self-legitimization. The Black Man had a history as dignified, and respected as anyone; perhaps even more so in their eyes.

Jesus was Black. The original people of Israel were Black.

Crowdy defined a concept that was later co-opted by other Blacks many years later. *Black is beautiful.*

Crowdy moved his family from Guthrie to Lawrence, Kansas in 1896. He incorporated his first church in Lawrence. The Lawrence Church brought in many receptive converts to Crowdy's message. His church expanded, soon opening new churches in Topeka and Emporia. Like a street missionary, he spread the word. He was arrested 22 times by an annoyed and incredulous constabulary. But his word continued to spread. Within three years of his arrival in Kansas, Crowdy's Church of God and Saints of Christ had been organized in 29 different Kansas towns.

The Prophet's message spread to Sedalia, Missouri, Chicago, Illinois, and various cities in New York. Crowdy moved to Philadelphia in 1899. His congregation in Philadelphia numbered about 1,300. His message and his centralized control over his congregants quickly became controversial as he became better known. He was accused, by a growing chorus of detractors, as spreading false doctrines and anarchy. Crowdy said they were jealous of his success and noted that the White mayor of Philadelphia "Mayor Ashbridge has seen my work and he finds no offense in me." As long as Black affairs did not spill over and involve the White power structure or society, Black life was left to itself.

In 1903, Crowdy purchased 40 acres in Suffolk, Virginia. He called it *Canaan Land*. Today, the land is the site of the international headquarters of the Church of God and the Disciples of Christ. Crowdy sent missionaries to South Africa in 1905. Though the Church began to fragment with internal dissension over control, it continued to grow. By the 1930's, the church had over 37,000 members, 200 "Tabernacles" and a presences in Jamaica and dozens more in Africa. The Church has significantly declined today.

Crowdy died August 4, 1908. He is buried in the sepulchers of the Church in Belleville, Virginia.

The Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom was founded by a charismatic Black leader about 1900 in Virginia. His name was Warren Roberson. Members of the community studied Hebrew and Yiddish. They followed a number of Jewish cultural norms. The Temple established their "Kingdom" in Harlem and another branch in Atlantic City in 1917. It collapsed shortly thereafter because of legal and moral issues involving the transportation of women across state lines for immoral purposes.

American Black Hebrew Israelite life continued to search for identity and religious direction after Crowdy's death.

The Church of the Living God, the Pillar and Ground for Truth of All Nations was founded by F.S. Cherry, a former American Black seaman and railroad worker. Cherry read and wrote Hebrew and Yiddish. He too moved his ministry to Philadelphia about 1917 where he had been influenced by the Church of God and the Saints of Christ. He formed his own more anti-White theological direction by teaching that God, Jesus, the Ancient Israelites were Black. White people are descended from Ghazi, a light skinned Black man who was cursed. Adherents

believed that contemporary Jews are imposters and not descendants of the known Tribes of Israel, Judah and Benjamin. They observed the Jewish Sabbath, the Passover, prohibited pork in their diets, forbade divorce and photography, and rejected any Christian Holy Day.

In the background of the Black Hebrew Israelite movements, American Blacks continued to struggle for their Civil Rights against a resurgent KKK, virulent Jim Crow laws, and a rising American belief in eugenics.

Marcus Garvey, a highly controversial Jamaican Black Nationalist, led the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. It was centered in New York. By 1919, Garvey, as the editor of the 2,000,000 circulation *Negro World* newspaper, was a major influence in American Black life. Garvey called for a back to Africa movement and was virulently anti-Semitic. He had been deeply influenced by Duse Mohammed Ali, a British actor, journalist and ardent Muslim proselytizer in London. Garvey united with White Supremacists, the KKK and the notorious racist Senator Bilbo in his effort to direct American Blacks back to Africa.

When Garvey was convicted of mail fraud, he blamed the Jews. Garvey told a journalist in 1928, "When they wanted to get me they had a Jewish judge try me, and a Jewish prosecutor. I would have been freed but two Jews on the jury held out against me ten hours and succeeded in convicting me, whereupon the Jewish judge gave me the maximum penalty."

President Coolidge pardoned Garvey and he was deported. November 15, 1964, the Government of Jamaica proclaimed Garvey its first national Hero. He was reinterred in a shrine in National Heroes Park. The red, black and green flag of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League was adopted as the Black Liberation Flag commonly recognized in African American communities.

Rastafarians consider Garvey to be a prophet. Rastafarians are a spiritual movement that arose in the 1930's in Jamaica. They believe that Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, is Jesus incarnate and the Second Advent of Jesus's reincarnation. Selassie ascended the Ethiopian throne in 1930 and ruled until his death in 1974. Throughout the 1920's Garvey spoke of a Black king that will be crowned who will mark the days of coming Black liberation. The only "Black" African king with thousands of years of documented history who could trace their lineage back to King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba was the Christian Emperor of the kingdom of Ethiopia.

In the 1970's and 1980's, Israel, in a daringly high risk effort, brought home the surviving remnant of Ethiopian Jewry to Israel. They were in danger of destruction and extinction. The Israeli Law of Return applied to the Beta Israel, (Ethiopian Jews –Community of Israel) after Halakhic (religious) and constitutional discussions affirmed their Jewish identity.

Over the centuries, the Ethiopian Jewish community had intermarried with the local indigenous peoples. They were racially Black but had remained steadfastly Jewish in their cultural characteristics, faith and links to their Jewish identity for two thousand years. They are citizens of Israel today. They continue to struggle with the cultural challenges of the Western world of Israeli life.

Wentworth Arthur Matthews was born in the British West Indies, 1892. He personally claimed to have been born in Lagos, Nigeria but all his written records contradict that claim. He founded the *Commandment Keepers* in 1919, in Harlem.

Matthew was deeply influenced by two counter directing cultures. The first was the very positive relations and interactions he had with White Jews. The second was his close identification with Marcus Garvey and his separatist, Black Nationalist movement. Matthew self- assumed the title Rabbi. Learning about the Beta Israel community, the Ethiopian Jewish community, he added another very personal Black international link to his developing Jewish philosophy.

Central to Rabbi Matthew's views on Jews was that Black Jews were the original Jews. White Jews were the descendants of the fabled Jewish lost conversion kingdom of the Khazars in Central Asia. Black members of the Commandments Keepers closely adhered to traditional Ashkenazi Judaism, practiced Kashrut, observed the Sabbath, circumcised their male children, and abstained from pork. Like in the orthodox Jewish religious tradition, men and women were seated separately, orthodox Jewish prayer books in Hebrew were used. The Torah and the Talmud were central to the Commandment Keepers daily life. The Commandment Keeper's conversions of Black people to Judaism were not considered conversions by them. They were considered much more simply as a return to their roots. Christianity was totally rejected placing the Commandment Keepers well outside of mainstream of American Black religious life.

No matter how much the Commandment Keepers adhered to traditional Judaism, they and Rabbi Matthew, were never accepted by mainstream Jewry as part of the historical traditional Jewish world. Matthew eventually concluded that Black Jews would never be accepted as equals by the White Jewish community. The rejection of Matthew, and other self-adopted Black Jewish communities as Jews by the mainstream Jewish world, has led to a further distancing, and even significant affirmation, of historic Black anti-Semitism.

Following Rabbi Matthew's death in 1973, the mantle of Rabbinic leadership of the dwindling community of the Commandment Keepers eventually passed to "Rabbi" Capers Funnye. Rabbi Funnye founded and assumed the pulpit of the Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago. Ironically, he is a cousin to Michele Obama, the wife of President Obama.

Rabbi Funnye is for various reasons, some argue liberal Jewish values, others argue political expediency, accepted as a Rabbi by the Chicago Board of Rabbis today. The distance between Rabbi Funnye's Black Jewish community and the traditional Jewish community has not narrowed.

Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford was, like a number of Black Hebrew Israelite leaders, an immigrant from the West Indies to the United States. He became an active member of Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association. Ford, a musician by training was employed by the British Navy for a period, wrote the UNIA's, *The Universal Ethiopian Anthem* and published the Universal Ethiopian Hymnal. Conflicts with Garvey over royalties and politics caused them to separate.

Ford's life, and the interrelationships of different Black Hebrew Israelites in Harlem, is confusing and contradictorily recorded. Some sources indicate that Ford was an early convert to Rabbi Matthew's Commandment Keepers but had a falling out. Other sources claim that Ford, who assumed the title of Rabbi from a vague origin, ordained Rabbi Matthew so he could continue Ford's work in Ethiopia.

Ford founded his own synagogue in Harlem, Congregation Beth B'nai Abraham (1924), itself an offshoot of another early Black Hebrew community in Harlem, the Moorish Zionist Temple (1899). The congregation expanded modestly but eventually succumbed to financial failure.

Ford moved to Ethiopia and was present with a delegation at the coronation of Haile Selassie. He purchased 800 acres of land to try and begin the foundation for a Black Exodus from America to Ethiopia. The venture failed.

It is unclear what happened to Ford. Some sources say he died in Ethiopia. Other sources claim he returned to the United States under an assumed name of Fard beginning a new Black Nationalist religious and cultural community. The allegation was that Fard began what is today the Nation of Islam. Fard vanished mysteriously about 1935 and Elijah Muhammad assumed the leadership of the Nation of Islam. A central cultural element of the National of Islam is that Blacks are the chosen people, and Whites, especially Jews, are evil.

Over the years other Black Hebrew Israelite communities have formed such as the 1963 movement of led by Ben Carter to Dimona, Israel. Carter, leading an initial group of 300 Black American Hebrew Israelites from Chicago, came on temporary visas to Israel. They instead chose to remain and fight extradition. Carter claimed that as a Jew, he could settle under the Israeli Law of Return. The Israeli Rabbinate investigated the claim and concluded that Carter and his community were not Jews. The legal standoffs have continued for 40 years. In recent years, Carter, and now members of his community, have been given permanent residential or Israeli citizenship status. They are still not recognized as Jews but rather as Israelis. They serve

in the Israeli army and have frequently come into conflict with Israel over their support for the Palestinian cause. Their views harp back to the origins of the Black Hebrew Israelites and the supposition that the Jews of Israel are foreigners and were never the true Jews. Jews being foreigners and not the real Jews is also a major plank of Palestinian anti-Israel propaganda and Palestinian efforts to de-legitimize Jewish Israeli settlement.

Israel provides special financial consideration and support to Carter's community. Israel provides social security, child support, aid to the elderly, disabled and supplemental income to the Black Hebrew Israelites of Dimona. The Israeli Ministry of Education subsidizes the schooling for their children. Yet the refusal of Israel to recognize Carter's community as Jews, even after repeated Rabbinic and court investigations, has only exasperated American Black feelings against Israel and promoted further anti-Semitism within some branches of the American Black community.

The American Black Hebrew Israelite Community is a shadow of its heyday in the United States during the 1920's. Few American Blacks identify as Jews and even fewer identify with Ethiopia as being their cultural promised land. As the American Black Hebrew Israelite community declined, the Nation of Islam has grown in size, acceptability and respectability understood as another Black religious expression of Black Nationalism by Blacks and Whites.

Very few Black Hebrew Israelites would have wanted to be known as Jews in the 1930's, especially in Hitler's Europe.

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