

URBAN APOLOGETICS: A BRIEF SUMMARY OF BLACK HEBREW ISRAELITE BELIEFS AND HOW TO ENGAGE THEM

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I've had the privilege of working in urban ministry for close to a decade. I've experienced many joys and sorrows while serving the people of my city. However, despite the ups and downs, being faithful to the work of the ministry and walking with the Lord has been worth it.

In my experience in urban ministry, I have noticed that are some African-Americans that believe that Christianity is the "white man's religion." Because this belief is gaining influence within the black community, there is a growing need for urban apologetics within our community to push back against this false narrative. When a Christian engages in urban apologetics, they are defending the faith within the urban context by giving biblical truth, insight, and historical evidence.

The Gospel is the truth that all men and women must hear and believe. Jesus tells us in John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Our society must hear that there is a God that loves them beyond their wildest dreams. That he sees the dirt and griminess of our lives, yet, chooses to love and save us (Ephesians 1:3-7).

This message seems to be missing in many corners of urban America. Instead of seeing the Gospel as a message of love, forgiveness, grace, and liberation, some minorities see it as oppressive due to our nation's history. Sadly, there are groups in our urban communities that undermine the Gospel by pushing this narrative. One of those groups is the Black Hebrew Israelites. Though their beliefs vary, below are some of the unifying beliefs among them:

- African Americans are the Jews of the Bible
- All the laws of God must be followed to ensure salvation
- Christ did not "get rid of the law"
- Israel (African Americans and minorities) will be saved
- The Americanized Jesus is white and a "false" Messiah

The foundational verse for Black Hebrew Israelites is Deuteronomy 28:68 which says,

"And the Lord shall bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I spake 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."

What makes this group dangerous to minorities is the ethnocentric view of salvation it proclaims. As a way to find meaning within the suffering and loss experienced in American History, Black Hebrew Israelites have twisted Scripture to gain empowerment and identity. For example, within the BHI belief system, everything is based on the belief that Jesus himself was Black and that Black people are the "chosen" people. It also asserts that obeying the laws that were given to "us" (African Americans and minorities) is what achieves salvation.

In a society where the African American identity is misrepresented and villainized, the Hebrew Israelites offer identity, history, and hope. As a result of these messages and a longing for a deeper sense of purpose within our community, many people are being attracted to this ideology. So how does the American church counter or give voice to this ideology? As African American Christians, how can we champion the truth of the Gospel within our urban context? Here is a list of five suggestions to begin with. (Please note that this blog won't address every unifying Black Hebrew Israelite belief, but this serves as a good starting point):

1. Black Hebrew Israelites claim that Deuteronomy 28:68 prophesies the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. This is an erroneous view of the text. We must see the text as God's covenantal sign to his people. God is telling Israel that if they fail to live faithfully within the covenant then they will be punished by being scattered. God concludes by saying, "no one will buy you." However, when we chronicle the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, there was a lot of buying and trading going on. As a result, the Black Hebrew Israelite belief falls short. Additionally, some believe this curse was fulfilled between A.D. 66-70 when Emperor Vespasian and son his son Titus destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. During the siege, many Jews were either killed, sent to Egypt and worked in the mines, or scattered across Asia. The destruction of Jerusalem was also foretold by Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 24:1-8; Mark 13:1-8; Luke 21:5-24).
2. As Christians, we must champion the belief that Christ heals the nations and that he is our Prince of Peace. We must also not hide the fact that for generations, many churches in America perpetuated a false theology that encouraged racism and slavery. This ideology is the antithesis of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Not only is it sinful, but also it destroys the relationship between brothers and sisters in the Kingdom. Jesus came not only to redeem mankind but to also unify his people, made of "one new man" (Ephesians 4:1-6), from every nation (Rev. 7:9). For minorities, we must not allow the misuse of Scripture to lead us away from the one who died for us. Jesus himself knows the pain of injustice and corruption (both political and religious). He is more than able to both heal the nations and empathize with our pain (Hebrews 4:15).
3. Remember that in the kingdom of God there is no favored race. Hebrew Israelites claim that minorities are a favored race, but in reality, this is not true. From a contextual standpoint, Israel (in Scripture) was chosen by God to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 49:6). By their reverence and obedience to God, the outside world would look into their lives and be drawn to the living God, Yahweh. It was never God's intention to exclude other nations. My African American brothers and sisters, we must be on guard as we hear messages and ideologies such as these. Racism and American history can pull at the strings of our hearts in a way very few things can. Because of this, we must be careful and vigilant when applying the truth of the Gospel and Scripture as we witness to groups like Black Hebrew Israelites in our streets. The message of the Gospel is not only an open invitation to all, but it also levels the playing field. At the cross, all of mankind are made aware of their need for Christ, despite their cultural heritage and history.
4. Africans and African Americans, based on biblical genealogy, are not the Israelites of the Bible. **In Scripture, Ham, Noah's son, is the father of the African race** (Gen. 10:6; 1 Chron. 1:8-16). Additionally, in various places, the psalmist writes that his people (Israel) were slaves in the land of Ham, which is Egypt (Psalms 78:51, 105:23, 106:22). **As one traverses through biblical genealogies, it is clear that**

Ham's lineage does not lead us back to Abraham or Israel. However, Noah's son, Shem, begins the bloodline of Abraham (Gen. 10:1-26; 1 Chronicles 1:17-27), who becomes the "father" of Israel (Exodus 3:6). Because of this evidence, it's impossible to claim Africans or African-Americans as Israelites.

5. The Law is holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:12). Yet, the law was never meant to save. The law shows us our sin and our need for a Savior (Romans 3:20-21). Hebrew Israelites believe that salvation is found in the Torah and that Jesus didn't come to get rid of the law. The truth is no one is justified under the law (Romans 3:28) and Christ is the only one that could fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17). In him, we have perfection because he obeyed all of God's laws perfectly. His righteousness has been imputed to us and he has taken on our sin. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

So, as you engage with Hebrew Israelites not only should you keep these things in mind but also:

1. **Listen and empathize.** Many of us minorities are hurting and looking for meaning and dignity. Hebrew Israelites and other urban cults are simply looking for life and value in these ideologies and, truthfully, all of us at various points in our lives have looked for value and identity in lifeless pursuits. The reality is, everything we need for value and life is found in Christ. It is to that end we listen and empathize, helping to turn hurting, broken, traumatized hearts to the Savior. Give answers to the hurting heart, not one-up their claims.
2. **Seek to win a soul, not an argument.** What should set us apart from Black Hebrew Israelites and other urban cults is our love for Christ and our desire to look like him. One of the best verses when it comes to the ministry of apologetics is 1 Peter 3:15-16. Peter writes:

"But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame." (CSB)

When we show the character of Jesus when we are defending our faith and giving answers about why we follow the risen Christ, how we express our viewpoint is as important as what we are expressing.

3. **Not all Black Hebrew Israelites are radical and aggressive.** Because we cannot lump everyone into the same camp, differentiate the kind of BHI you're talking with. There are some BHIs that profess this ideology, but instead are truth-seekers who've been misled. These souls are to be treated with care, not contempt or judgment, and shown the supernatural historical truth of Jesus and his church.

Remember, the Lord has called his people to be light in a dark and unbelieving world. This even means being salt and light in our urban communities. Engaging in urban apologetics and evangelism is spiritual warfare because you are going on the offensive against Satan and the forces of darkness. Be on guard. Be prayerful. Be courageous. Have your spiritual eyes open and know that the Lord has gone before you as you attempt to engage groups like the Black Hebrew Israelites. God loves them more than you do and let's allow Him to guide us as we are equipped to share the vastness of his love.