

The United States and Britain in Fantasy

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Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986), one of the most popular and controversial radio and television evangelists of the twentieth century, was one of the better known proponents of the teaching known as Anglo- or British-Israelism.¹ His most popular book on the subject was *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*. According to this theory, there is a distinction between Jews and Israelites; the descendants of the Israelites are now the white, English-speaking peoples of Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc., as well as the majority of the people living in northwestern Europe; the above nations are the Israel of Bible prophecy, and the British Royal family is Jewish and descended from King David of Israel.²



If any Worldwide Church of God doctrine can be considered Herbert W. Armstrong's pet teaching more than any other, perhaps this is it. Armstrong was not, however, its originator. According to Ruth Tucker, the idea that British ancestry could be traced to ancient Israel originated in the seventeenth century with a man named John Sadler.³

Later, Canadian-born Richard Brothers (1757-1824) claimed a right to the British throne based on his assertion that he was a descendant of King David of Israel. Brothers was committed to an asylum. In 1840, a man named John Wilson published a restatement of Brothers' ideas in *Our Israelitish Origin*. This restatement of the probably mentally deranged Brothers' ideas served to popularize the view. In 1902, J. H. Allen wrote a book called *Judah's Sceptre and Joseph's Birthright*. J. Gordon Melton writes: "Through the efforts of Merritt Dickinson, who had read and accepted the arguments in Allen, Anglo-Israel thought entered the Church of God (Seventh Day) [though it was not accepted as an official teaching of that church]."⁴ Armstrong, once associated with the Church of God (Seventh Day), based his book *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy* (later renamed *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*) largely on Allen's book.

As founder and "apostle" of the Worldwide Church of God, Armstrong considered British-Israelism to be one of most important doctrines in his church. Writing in the late 1970s of what he considered the treasonous watering down of the church's teachings behind his back, Armstrong criticized those who tried to minimize this teaching: "Church teachings were being changed. The most resultful booklet of all, *The United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, was attacked, greatly deleted and later put out of circulation."⁵ Armstrong ordered that the full-length version of the book be circulated once again.

As is all Anglo-/British-Israelism, Herbert W. Armstrong's belief concerning the modern identity of Israel is heavily based on a mix of sloppy scholarship and pure myth. Yet, incredibly, Herbert Armstrong called this fantasy "the vital key necessary to unlock closed doors of biblical prophecy" and "the strongest proof of the inspiration and authority of the Holy Bible!" Armstrong even went so far as to claim, "It is, at the same time, the strongest proof of the very active existence of the living God!"⁶

The United States and Britain in Prophecy was one of Armstrong's larger works and to refute it point-by-point would take a good-sized volume. Fortunately, it is not necessary for our purpose to go into every particular to prove Armstrong's claims false. Picking out only a few points will suffice.

First, an examination of some of the myths that Armstrong preached will help convey the flavor of this wild hypothesis. One was that the tribe of Irish mythology that Armstrong continually misspelled as the "Tuathe De Danaan" or "Tuatha De Danaan" was Israel's tribe of Dan having migrated to Ireland. Armstrong claims, "Tuatha De means the 'people of God.' The name Dunn in the Irish language, for example, means the same as Dan in the Hebrew: judge."⁷ The implication is that the name of this Irish tribe identifies it as the biblical tribe of Dan.

In reality, Tuatha Dé Danann (correct spelling) means "people of the goddess Danu." In Irish legend, the Tuatha Dé Danann were the fourth race to invade Ireland. According to Françoise Le Roux and Christian-J. Guyonvarc'h writing in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, "They came from the north, according to a very old Hyperborean tradition."⁸ Israel is, of course, not to the north of Ireland.

The accounts of the Tuatha Dé Danann sound like they are straight out of "sword and sorcery" fiction. Apparently so as not to ruin his

credibility, Armstrong never related the entire legend. Notice these far-fetched highlights from the *Encyclopedia of Religion*: The Tuatha Dé Danann invade Ireland, take it from the Fir Bholg, and "defend it against the demonic Fomhoire." They divide the land with the Goidels, "the Goidels on the surface of the earth and the Tuatha Dé Danann within the hills and beneath the lakes...symbolic and concrete representations of the otherworld." When Lugh (the shining one) enters Tara, the Tuatha Dé Danann's royal court, "he enumerates all his abilities to the doorkeeper druid and is allowed to enter precisely because he possesses together all the capabilities of the other gods."⁹

We have gone this far with the description only to impress the complete fantasy with which we are dealing. Yet this is one part of a doctrine that Armstrong says proves the existence of God!

After saying the tribe of Dan went to Ireland, Armstrong says that the prophet Jeremiah later joined them. According to this story, Jeremiah brought with him a stone that is supposedly the stone beneath the coronation chair in Westminster Abbey in London. British monarchs spend part of the coronation ceremony sitting on this chair with the stone beneath them. According to legend, this stone is "Jacob's pillar stone," the stone upon which Jacob had his dream of a stairway to heaven on which angels were ascending and descending (Genesis 28:10-22).¹⁰ In reality, this stone has been proven to be from Scotland.¹¹

Jeremiah also brought to Ireland, according to Armstrong, the daughter of Zedekiah, king of Judah. When this daughter married the son of the king of Ireland, the Jewish royal family descended from King David was successfully transplanted to the British Isles. Eventually this Jewish royal lineage entered the British Royal family. The lineage of Queen Elizabeth II, then, goes back to King David of Israel.¹²

All this is a twisted version of various legends. Yet, by this, Armstrong tries to prove that a descendant of King David is still sitting on a throne over the people of Israel (according to Armstrong, the British). This is based on Armstrong's understanding of Jeremiah 33:17: "For thus saith the Lord; 'David shall never want [fail to have] a man to sit upon the throne of the house of Israel.'" After also quoting verses 25-26, Armstrong writes: "Unless you can stop this old earth from turning on its axis—unless you can remove the sun and the moon and stars from heaven, says the Almighty, you cannot prevent Him from keeping His covenant to maintain continuously, through all generations,

FOREVER, from the time of David and Solomon, a descendant of David in one continuous dynasty on that throne!"¹³

Armstrong's conclusion is completely unsound, however. Jeremiah 33:18 continues from verse 17: "Neither shall the priests the Levites want [fail to have] a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, and to kindle meat offerings, and to do sacrifice continually." Armstrong admits that the Levites do not offer sacrifice today: "But Jeremiah prophesied that Levites would always be available—in existence—who could offer sacrifices if there were a temple."¹⁴ Armstrong cannot have it both ways. If verse 18 refers to lineage and not activity, then so does verse 17.

Jeremiah 33:17 simply means that the lineage of David would be preserved, not that there would be no interruption in its ruling over the house of Israel. The reason it was to be preserved was to prove, as shown in the genealogies of Matthew and Luke, that Jesus Christ was of the line of David. And with Jesus Christ, Jeremiah 33:17 reached its ultimate fulfillment because the living Jesus Christ is the living, legitimate Heir to the throne. If the British monarchs were really sitting on the throne of David, they would be usurpers!

Armstrong's entire case rests on his argument that the ancient northern Kingdom of Israel consisted of 10 of the tribes of Israel and that these were captured by the Assyrians and never returned. Armstrong emphasizes that while "Israel" might mean any or all of the tribes (including the Jews), "house of Israel" refers exclusively to the tribes of the northern Kingdom of Israel. The house of Israel remained distinct from the tribes living in the southern Kingdom of Judah—called Jews—and became known as the lost Ten Tribes.¹⁵ If we can prove that the house of Israel did not remain distinct from the Jews and that there is no such thing as the lost Ten Tribes, Armstrong's teaching in *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* falls apart.

In Acts 2:14, Peter begins his inspired speech by saying: "Ye men of Judæa, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem." A few verses later, in the same sermon and to the same people, Peter says, "Ye men of Israel, hear these words" (verse 22). He ends in verse 36 by saying to the same audience, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, Whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." To Peter, the men of Judæa, the men of Israel, and all the house of Israel were one and the same. Notice also that Peter equates those who crucified Jesus with all the house of Israel. Peter could not do this if the house of Israel were not even in Palestine at

the time. The Jews were not just the tribes Armstrong says lived in the old southern Kingdom of Judah. The Jews included "all the house of Israel."

Even the words of our Lord prove that Armstrong's distinction between the house of Israel and the Jews is false. In addressing the twelve apostles before sending them out on a mission, Jesus said in Matthew 10:5-6: "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Notice that the apostles were not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans. These instructions must have been for the immediate mission at hand. They could not have applied to the apostles' mission after Jesus' resurrection because after His resurrection Jesus instituted through the apostles a ministry to the Gentiles.

Since the apostles could not go among the Gentiles and since they could not go into any city of the Samaritans and because they had physical limitations where they could go during this short mission, it is evident they went to the Jews in their immediate area. It is the Jews whom our Lord called the "lost sheep of the house of Israel," not tribes of Israel outside Judea.

Similar proof is found in Matthew 15. When approached by a Canaanite woman asking Him to heal her daughter, Jesus at first said nothing (verse 23). Then in verse 24 He answered, "I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel." As can be seen throughout the Gospels, Jesus' personal mission was to the Jews. Yet in Matthew 15:24, He calls those to whom He was sent the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus Christ considered the Jews to be the lost sheep of the house of Israel.¹⁶

But if, instead of being Israelites scattered among the nations and who had lost their identity, the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" were Jews who knew their identity, how were they lost? The "lost" refers to spiritual condition, not geographic disorientation. In Isaiah 53:6 we read, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all." This agrees with Jesus' parable in Luke 15 and Matthew 18 of the sinner symbolized by the lost sheep. As Jesus said in Matthew 18:11, "For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost."

Contrary to Herbert Armstrong's pet idea, then, there is no distinction between the Jews and the house of Israel. And "lost" is a description of the spiritual condition of the house of Israel—the Jews—not of their physical whereabouts. How appropriate that while *The United States and Britain in Prophecy* is full of "fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith" (1 Timothy 1:4), the truth points to Jesus' mission of salvation.

One last bit of evidence before closing this subject: After Jesus' resurrection, God opened salvation to the Gentiles. But most members of the Worldwide Church of God and its daughter churches are white, English-speaking people and the people of northwestern Europe. This means that—using Armstrong's British-Israelism definitions—most "true Christians" (that is, according to Armstrongism, members of the churches that teach the doctrines of Herbert Armstrong) are Israelites, physical descendants of Jacob (Israel). This contradicts the biblical teaching "that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in" (Romans 11:25; see also 10:19; 11:11, 32; and Matthew 21:43). But the fantasy world of Herbert Armstrong aside, most Christians today are Gentiles, just as the Bible says they would be.

Notes

1. Some of the adherents of Anglo-Israelism are part of what is called the Identity Movement, which has ties to white supremacy and neo-Nazism. Armstrong was never associated with the Identity Movement, although people in it have sometimes used his writings to promote their cause.
2. Herbert W. Armstrong, "Seven Proofs of the True Church, [part one]," *The Good News*, November 20, 1978, pp. 13, 16. This information is also found throughout Herbert W. Armstrong's *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*. The edition used for this critique is the ninth edition (Pasadena, CA: Worldwide Church of God, 1986), November 1986 printing.
3. Ruth A. Tucker, *Another Gospel, Alternative Religions and the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), p. 207.
4. J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1986), p. 53.
5. Herbert W. Armstrong, "What Is a Liberal?," *The Worldwide News*, February 19, 1979, p. 3.
6. Armstrong, *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, pp. 2-3.

7. Ibid., p. 98.

8. Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 15, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1987), s.v. "Tuatha Dé Danann."

9. Ibid.

10. Armstrong, *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, pp. 98-102.

11. Melton, *Encyclopedic Handbook of Cults in America*, p. 59.

12. Armstrong, *The United States and Britain in Prophecy*, pp. 100-102.

13. Ibid., pp. 55-57.

14. Ibid., p. 56.

15. Ibid., pp. 64-71.

16. Jesus' mentioning in John 10:16 of "other sheep...which are not of this fold" is a reference to the Gentiles.