

THE NATIVES AS ISRAELITES

In Joseph Smith's Day It Was Widely Believed That All Native Americans Were From A Lost Tribe Of Israel

It was an idea that had started with some early Portuguese and Spanish colonists, and it only picked up steam over the next 200 years. If you hold to a strict literal biblical world view, then it makes perfect sense. They still believed that everyone on earth descended from Noah's crew, so the Western world wouldn't have been inhabited by anyone after that flood. Then God scatters the ten tribes of Israel and they are "lost" in lands nobody knows about (nobody could identify any lost Jewish tribes in the Old World). It made sense to assume that the lost tribes must have become the first inhabitants of America just a few thousand years earlier. With this expectation, many who settled the "New World" had convinced themselves that they were seeing Israelite customs among the natives. By Joseph Smith's time, it was a popular idea that many were talking about and writing about.

This would get way too long if I tried to provide quotes from all of them, but to give you a taste I'll briefly rattle off just *some* major proponents of the natives being Israelites. Those who want to explore these works can find many of them readily available [HERE](#):

Thomas Thorowgood wrote a book called "*Jewes In America, or Probabilities That the Americans are of that Race*" in 1650 (London). Proposed that the "gospel" was once preached in ancient America. Discussed the importance of converting the Indians to Christianity.

Samuel Sewall's 1697 book *Phenomena Quaedam Apocalyptica* published in Boston again in 1727 suggests the Indians are Israelites. He suggests that Bible verses about Jesus preaching to "*the spirits in prison*" were about the "*going of Jesus Christ into*

America” to preach to them. He suggests the “*other sheep*” in John 10:16 that Jesus was to visit were the “*sheep belonging to this American fold.*”

James Adair from South Carolina wrote “*History of the American Indians*” in 1775, which spends quite a bit of time proposing the Indians are a “lost tribe” of Israel due to 23 parallels he sees. He believes their language is a corrupt form of Hebrew, and thinks he sees customs like circumcision, Sabbath Day, etc (He is referenced in Yates and Moulton’s “*History of New York*”)

Charles Crawford published a booklet in 1799 in Philadelphia with the very long title: “*An Essay On The Propagation of the Gospel In Which There Are Numerous Facts and Arguments Adduced to Prove that Many of the Indians In America Are Descended from the Ten Tribes.*”

Elias Boudinot from New Jersey picked up on the same themes with his “*Star In The West; or a Humble Attempt to Discover the Long Lost Ten Tribes of Israel*” in 1816. He quotes James Adair quite a bit. (He too is referenced in “*A History of New York*”)
Edward King Viscount Kingsborough of Ireland was at the same time trying to prove the same ideas—publishing Maya codices in an effort to prove their Israelite origins.

A very important one is Ethan Smith and his book “*View of the Hebrews*” published by Oliver Cowdery’s pastor in Vermont in 1823. This one is important enough that we’ll discuss it in detail in the next section. His book is also referenced in “*A History of New York.*”

John Haywood, in his 1823 “*The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee*” has a whole chapter outlining the “biblical traditions” and “Hebrew Customs” of the Cherokee Indians, and believes “letters inscribed in rocks” in America can be traced to the Hebrews.

Josiah Priest's 1825 "*Wonders of Nature*" published in Albany, NY includes a section titled "Proofs that the Indians of N. America were lineally descended from the ancient Hebrews." He quotes "View of the Hebrews" including sections about how essential it is to identify the lost Israelites so they can be "restored" as prophesied in Isaiah. In his 1833 "*American Antiquities*" he states: "*The opinion that the American Indians are the descendants of the lost Ten Tribes, is now a popular one, and generally believed*" (pg. 73).

Theologian Roger Williams believed the Indian language was based in Hebrew, and thinks he sees Jewish customs among the Indians. See "*A Key into the Language of America,*" 1827.

A few years later in 1836, Barbara A. Simon published the following book in London: "*The Ten Tribes Of Israel—Historically Identified With The Aborigines Of The Western Hemisphere.*"

There are many more examples, but I think you get the idea. It was common to believe that not only the Moundbuilders, but the Native Americans as a whole, were lost Israelites. Some used this to argue for better treatment of the Natives, and of course given that the idea of a literal gathering of scattered Israel was common at the time, many Christians felt it was their duty and privilege to be part of the prophecy that these lost Israelites would be "gathered" or "Christianized."