

Between Two Worlds: The “Israelite-AmeriIndian” Theory In 17th Century Abrahamic Thought

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Abstract— The discovery of the West Indies by Christopher Columbus in the fifteenth century disrupted traditional Abrahamic cosmology and millenarianism in Europe. As the existence of previously unidentified peoples contradicted the scriptural notion of monogenesis, conquest in the Americas required not only a physical colonization, but a spiritual appropriation. Religious theories were developed in response to explain indigenous communities’ isolation, absence, and independence from the known world. The Israelite-AmeriIndian theory—which hypothesized that the indigenous peoples were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel—popularized in the mid-seventeenth century. Its two main proponents, Thomas Thorowgood and Menasseh ben Israel, a Presbyterian minister and a Marrano rabbi respectively, attempted to reconcile the reality of the Americas with their historical imagination of the Old World. In expressing opposing interpretations of the Israelite myth and the role of indigenous Americans in the exile and future eschaton, Thorowgood and ben Israel demonstrated divergent understandings of the consequence and purpose of colonialism in the biblical metanarrative.

New World, Old Problems

The Crusades of the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth century and the Reconquista of the late-fifteenth century were two monumental events in shaping Christian notions of the biblical world.¹ Concurrent to these military campaigns in Europe and Asia, Christian theologians were in the process of redefining the social identity of an ever-expanding Christendom.

¹ Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. “AAR Centennial Roundtable: Religion, Conquest, and Race in the Foundations of the Modern/Colonial World.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 3 (2014): 637. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24487991>.

More than previous centuries, Christians in the Late Medieval to early-modern period were tasked with categorizing those considered within and those considered outside of their 'world.' This assumed a paradigm of a spiritual center, either in Rome or Palestine, with everything defined in relation to that loci.² This division between religious communities was composed of neighboring Muslim nations, Jewish communities, and pagan peoples from both Africa and the Far East. For Christians, European Jews, in particular, were deemed 'foreign' insiders. Fixation on Jewish communities, and their geographic locations, was appreciated as a manifestation of Divine Providence.³ The arc of Jewish exilic history, to Christian eyes, reflected this truth, intersecting in both time and space. God's abrogation of His covenant, the destruction of the Temple, and the millenium-and-a-half of dislocation, now in Europe and Asia, indicated the biblical design for the Second Coming of Christ.

During this very time period, on the international stage, global European expansion into the Americas forever altered the composition of Abrahamic faith. No longer sacred communities, Christianity, became a temporal, socio-religious empire.⁴ With its imperial settlement in the New World—beginning with countries such as Spain and Portugal and later Britain and the Netherlands—"the very terms in which religion was approached and understood" were reformulated in the colonial context.⁵ Europe thus became a religio-political world order.

In the centuries following Columbus' discovery of the West Indies, the boundaries, both literally and metaphorically, of the world were extended beyond Europe, Asia, and Africa. The foreign powers of the Western Hemisphere, engaged in recasting the monotheistic landscape. The Americas dramatically contributed to biblical prophecy, transforming the unsettled land into a pseudo-Zion. Christian Europeans recognized the magnitude of the new continent as a parallel was drawn to scriptural sources in the Old Testament. Similar to Israelites' conquest in the Promised Land, Europeans believed their colonial project was a fulfillment of their covenantal duty. In addition, just as the Canaanites were native to Israel, so too were indigenous communities present in the Americas.

A difference, though, was clearly evident: these aboriginal peoples were a wholly new "other." Europeans were confronted with the complete deconstruction of their center-periphery binary; there existed a set of peoples independent from the known world. The discovery of native peoples in a foreign, isolated continent was in direct contradiction to the scriptural notion of monogenesis. While Genesis purported that all of

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 642.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

humanity descended from Adam and Eve, the reality at-hand appeared to be in direct opposition.

The idea of a historical relationship between Europeans and indigenous peoples seemed inconceivable to the minds of Europeans. Questions arose regarding the origins of the autochthonous communities, preoccupying the minds of both Christians and Jews. Thus, since their first contact, Europeans were presented with an essential question: how did the Americas come to be inhabited by these people?

As such, the discovery of indigenous communities deeply upset the normative framework of Abrahamic cosmology, theology, and millenarianism. It disrupted everything Europeans knew about their sense of the world and their place in it. Thus, this interaction of worlds—European and native, old and new, known and unknown—confronted Europeans as they campaigned in the continent. As such, American colonization, which enlarged the geographic spheres of the Old World, required not only the physical conquest over the land, but an appropriation of its people within Europe's master narrative.

The Land of “Arsareth”

For some Christians and Jews, the solution to the ‘native’ question was to be found in the exegetical discussions of the biblical narrative. The Book of Kings recounts the fall of the United Monarchy of Israel into two kingdoms, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, following the reign of Solomon. While Judah consisted of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south, Israel was made up of the tribes of Reuben, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Ephraim, Manasseh, and members of the tribe of Levi in the north.⁶ The scriptures in 2 Kings 17:6 describes the downfall of Israel in the eighth century BCE: “In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria took Samaria, and carried Israel away unto Assyria, and placed them in Halah, and in Habor, on the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes.” The scriptural account then shifts towards focusing on the kingdom of Judah, with little explanation as to what occurred to the ten tribes of Israel following their exile.⁷

With the long deferral of their prophetic return, the fate of the Israelites captured the imagination of Judeo-Christian communities for centuries. As such, with the biblical texts vague, the Israelites remained in obscurity, forever lost to an undefined location, though never forgotten.

⁶ According to the Bible, the ten tribes descended from the twelve sons of Jacob, who, after entering Canaan following the Exodus, were apportioned a lot of land in the land of Israel.

⁷ The only time in the Bible that the phrase “ten tribes” is used is in 1 Kings 11:31 when the prophet Elijah tells Jeroboam that God, out of anger at Solomon's transgressions, will divide the Kingdom of Israel. “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: ‘I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon, and will give ten tribes to thee.’”

A tradition arose, derived from the biblical account, which impelled Europeans to continuously search for the lost tribes. For those devoted to solving the issue of the Israelite exile,⁸ though, this mission attempted to reconstruct the migration of peoples who had disappeared in the eighth century BCE, and left no record after that time. Therefore, as the source materials were not explicit about *where* or *who* were the Israelites, it necessitated the three actions: their discovery, gathering, and reunion with their destined prophetic return.

In this ever-evolving mythos, a fantasy which persisted across centuries, conforming to historical circumstances, the Israelites' lostness remained in the consciousnesses of both Christian⁹ and Jewish¹⁰ communities. An object of inquiry for millenia, Christians and Jews used the tribes of Israel "as a point of reference, tying historical developments to their exile and return."¹¹

Following the discovery of the Western Hemisphere, European colonial projects were imbued with religious significance. Christian and Jewish thinkers alike turned to a variety of religious theories¹² to explain these previously unidentified peoples of the Americas. One hypothesis that would become widespread, persisting for over three centuries, and held among a number of nations, was that the Americas' natives were descendants of the ten lost tribes of Israel.¹³ While this theory first arose in the fifteenth

⁸ A caveat must also be made that within both Christian and Jewish circles, differing approaches were raised to the issue of the lost tribes of Israel. While an entire paper can be dedicated to these varying approaches, for the sake of simplicity, I will be using the term 'Christian' and 'Jew.'

⁹ For some Christians, they believed that Jews had to be converted in order to bring the Second Coming. While they too looked to the biblical sources, they also drew from apocrypha. The work 2 Esdras, attributed to the biblical figure of Ezra, provided a cryptic account of what later occurred to the ten tribes. In specific, 2 Esdras 13:39–45 was used as the source for the location of the Israelites: "And whereas thou sawest that he gathered another peaceable multitude unto him. Those are the ten tribes, which were carried away prisoners out of their own land in the time of Hosea the king, whom Salmanasar the king of Assyria led away captive, and he carried them over the waters, and so came they into another land. But they took this counsel among themselves, that they would leave the multitude of the heathen, and go forth into a further country, where never mankind dwelt; That they might there keep their statutes, which they never kept in their own land. And they entered into Euphrates by the narrow places of the river. For the most High then shewed signs for them, and held still the flood, till they were passed over. For through that country there was a great way to go, namely, of a year and a half: and the same region is called Arsareth." The question for Christians was where in the world was the land of "Arsareth."

¹⁰ For Jews, the exile of Israel was part of the redemptive prophecy, requiring the return of both Israel and Judah to Zion. The Jews mainly drew from prophetic verses in Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Ezekiel (which refer to the scattering of Israel and its future return from 'ends' or 'corners' of the earth). For example, Ezekiel 11:17 writes: "Thus saith the Lord God; I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel." Other passages such as Ezekiel 36:19 and Jeremiah 23:8 mention, while neither identifying specifically where, the Ten Tribes were inside the Assyrian empire.

¹¹ Fenton, Elizabeth. *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. United States: NYU Press, 2020: 8.

¹² Other theories throughout history have claimed to have discovered members of the Lost Tribes of Israel in in Asia, Africa, and Europe. This includes communities such as the Kashmiri Jews, Bnei Menashe, Bene Ephraim, Beta Israel, and Black Hebrew Israelites.

¹³ A clarification must be made before the paper continues. The language used to refer to indigenous peoples of the Americas as 'AmeriIndians' is a historically controversial term. Since there are those who consider it an appropriate term, and I believe it is particularly important in explaining the Israelite theory, I have chosen to use it in the paper.

century,¹⁴ it was in the following century that the idea would be thoroughly explicated and inculcated within Abrahamic circles.

Two such figures who expressed the Christian and Jewish perspectives on the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory were Thomas Thorowgood (1595-1669) and Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657). Writing in the mid-seventeenth century, Thorowgood, a Presbyterian minister from Britain, and ben Israel, a rabbi from Portugal who relocated to the Netherlands, benefitted from promoting the theory. Providing a similar response, their beliefs defined the indigenous peoples' place in the Old and New World, resolving the longstanding sacred mystery, and affirming the contemporary landscape in the context of religious tradition.

By resolving the origins of the indigenous peoples (i.e. placing them in the biblical World) both authors resolved the contemporary religious crisis. As such, they solved their religious conflicts by conforming Americas' geographic reality with their own historical imagination. The Israelite-AmeriIndian theory, thus, aided both the Christian and Jewish communities. By reconciling their cosmological past with their millenarian future, both Thorowgood and ben Israel asserted colonialism as part of the providential design.¹⁵

Jewes in America and Christian Millenarianism

Thomas Thorowgood's *Jewes in America; or, Probabilities That the Americans are of that Race*¹⁶ was "the first published endorsement of the theory of the lost tribes written in Old or New England," propagating the hypothesis within Anglophone circles.¹⁷ After reading a number of European first-hand biographies of travelers to the New World, in the mid-1630's, Thorowgood became engrossed with the Israelite-AmeriIndian relationship. Thorowgood began a project, which he completed by the following decade, to write a full report on the natives' status as members of the lost tribes. On November 22, 1648, *Jewes in America* was authorized for

¹⁴ One of the first sources to promote the Israelite origin theory was Gilbertus Genebradus' *Chronographia in duos libros distincta* in 1567.

¹⁵ Meghan C. L. Howey. "'The Question Which Has Puzzled, and Still Puzzles': How American Indian Authors Challenged Dominant Discourse about Native American Origins in the Nineteenth Century." *American Indian Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (2010): 436. <https://doi.org/10.5250/amerindiquar.34.4.0435>.

¹⁶ Religious thinkers during these centuries did not distinguish between the term "Jew" and "Israelite." For both Christians and Jews, the bringing of the messianic age was equally relevant to the Jews of Europe and Asia as it was to what would later be referred to as the native "Israelites." This is a misnomer for which the biblical narrative itself provides the distinction. After the bifurcation of the united monarchy, "Israelite," was generally restricted to the tribes, while the kingdom of Judah, the inhabitants of southern Israel, would later be referred to as "Jews."

¹⁷ Cogley, Richard W. "The Ancestry of the American Indians: Thomas Thorowgood's 'Jewes in America' (1650) and 'Jews in America' (1660)." *English Literary Renaissance* 35, no. 2 (2005): 306. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24463683>.

publication and was ultimately printed in April of 1650 under the same title.¹⁸

The treatise explicated the Israelite origins of autochthonous groups to the Americas, undergirded by the principle of The Bright Advent.¹⁹ Once discovered, Thorowgood believed that the Israelites, as part of the global Jewish community, would be converted to Christianity to engender the Second Coming.²⁰ With the arrival of English settlers in New England in 1646, the Western Hemisphere bore the promise of realizing biblical design. Thorowgood's *Jewes in America* provided its blueprint.

In regards to the proof of Israelite ancestry in the Americas, Thorowgood's case lay on a proto-ethnographic argument: vestiges of the Bible, the Mosaic Law, and religious ceremonies. Thorowgood believed there were remnants of Mosaic teachings, beliefs, practices, and language in indigenous societies of an Israelite religion and culture. According to Thorowgood, "these vestiges included circumcision, levirate marriage, the segregation of menstruating women, and other Mosaic laws; traces of the Hebrew language; and legends about a creator god, a primordial couple, a flood, and other early biblical figures and events."²¹

Addressing the geographical question was of utmost importance for Thorowgood. The minister thought that the ten tribes became native to the New World, implicitly arguing that "the lost Israelites were solely responsible for populating the Americans prior to the advent of Europeans"²² Thorowgood answered two fundamental questions: how and where the native peoples' ancestors entered the Americas. Traveling through Asia, the two land masses were contiguous at a point and allowed passage into the New World. By "passing through the land or strait of Anian," near the present-day Bering Strait, the Israelites reached the New World.²³ As such, "the reports about Peru, Brazil, the West Indies, Virginia, or New England" was sufficient proof that the tribes of Israel settled throughout the Americas.²⁴

¹⁸ Ibid., 309.

¹⁹ The Bright Advent is considered by certain Christian sects as the period right before Christ's return to Earth; it was particularly popular in seventeenth-century British circles.

²⁰ "It 'hath bin the constant beliefe of the faithfull in every age,' he wrote in *Jewes in America*, 'that the Jewes before the end of the world shall be converted to Christianity.'"

²¹ Cogley, Richard W. "The Ancestry of the American Indians: Thomas Thorowgood's 'Jewes in America' (1650) and 'Jews in America' (1660)." *English Literary Renaissance* 35, no. 2 (2005): 312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24463683>.

²² Ibid., 313.

²³ Cogley, Richard W. "'The Most Vile and Barbarous Nation of all the World': Giles Fletcher the Elder's *The Tartars Or, Ten Tribes* (ca. 1610)." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 793. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ren.2008.0809>.

²⁴ Cogley, Richard W. "The Ancestry of the American Indians: Thomas Thorowgood's 'Jewes in America' (1650) and 'Jews in America' (1660)." *English Literary Renaissance* 35, no. 2 (2005): 312. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24463683>.

There was a presupposition in Thorowgood's work that the natives' "apostasy had not eradicated all evidence of their national heritage."²⁵ In accordance with Christian Protestant doctrine, Thorowgood emphasized that it was the sin of the ten tribes which forced God to punish His people by exiling them. Since they were idolaters, it necessitated their exile and dispersal throughout the world. After thousands of years, it was only natural, according to Thorowgood's logic, that, once they reached the New World, they had "degenerated so deeply into paganism that they lost conscious memory of their religious heritage."²⁶ Their savagery was not inherent to their identity, but was merely a condition of their transgressions.

Furthermore, Thorowgood understood the sufferings of the natives peoples, including those which came as a result of European settlement, as proof of the divine plan for the Jews: "native people suffer, because they were always already meant to suffer, because they are Israelites, who were always already meant to suffer."²⁷ While being 'lost' to the exile deconstructed their Judaic character, reshaping them into idolatrous Indians, their conversion, in turn, would transform them again into God's elected holy nation.

By disseminating his composition within the English-speaking world, Thorowgood's *Jewes in America* gave direction to his American contemporaries.²⁸ While New England, a newly settled colony in North America, was already in the process of converting natives, Thorowgood suffused proselytization with stronger spiritual sentiment.²⁹ Not only were missionaries instructing indigenous peoples in Christianity, but they were restoring religious, cultural, and linguistic traditions to the Israelites: proselytizing was truly a religiously momentous act.

Converting the communities surrounding New England now assumed a higher teleological status. It served to expedite Jewish conversion on behalf

²⁵ Cogley, Richard W. "'The Most Vile and Barbarous Nation of all the World': Giles Fletcher the Elder's The Tartars Or, Ten Tribes (ca. 1610)." *Renaissance Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2005): 802. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ren.2008.0809>.

²⁶ Cogley, Richard W. "The Ancestry of the American Indians: Thomas Thorowgood's 'Jewes in America' (1650) and 'Jews in America' (1660)." *English Literary Renaissance* 35, no. 2 (2005): 315. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24463683>.

²⁷ Fenton, Elizabeth. *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. United States: NYU Press, 2020: 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁹ Religious figures, such as Reverend John Eliot, known as the "Apostle to the Indians," who printed the first Bible in America in a native language, were thoroughly convinced by Thorowgood's work. After reading *Jewes in America*, Eliot wrote a letter to Thorowgood thanking him for spiritually inspiring the colony's colonial project. "Sir. By reading your book, entitled *Jewes in America; or Probability that the Americans be of that Race*, the Lord did put into my heart to search into some Scripture about that, and by comparing one thing with another, I thought, I saw some ground to conceive, that some of the Ten Tribes might be scattered even thus far, into these parts of America... And be glad shall he be, that can get hold on the skirt of a Jew, I have some cognitions, as well as others, of the first peopling of America."

of the millennium.³⁰ Therefore, in advocating for the colonial project in English settlements, Thorowgood's *Jewes in America* altered European conception of the Americas and the people who inhabited it.

Thomas Thorowgood's *Jewes in America* was a highly influential text, emboldening English colonization in the Western Hemisphere and preserving Christianity in the Old World. His placement of the indigenous peoples into a theology of salvation subsumed them "into the colonial social order."³¹ For Christians, the natives of the Americas were explained in the same context as world Jewry. Ultimately, they were part-and-parcel of the messianic project.

John Dury, a Scottish Calvinist minister and proponent for ecumenism, was a friend of Thomas Thorowgood. After reading the first draft of *Jewes in America*, Dury recalled a story he had remembered hearing in Holland in 1644. Living in the Hague as a domestic chaplain, he learned about a report which supported the notion of the Israelite-Indian relationship. After writing a letter of inquiry to the rabbi to clarify some of the details, Dury received a response in 1649.³² Inspired by this correspondence, this very rabbi, born in Portugal but then living in Amsterdam, finalized his own composition of the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory.

The Hope of Israel and Menasseh ben Israel

Menasseh ben Israel was a sephardic rabbi and eminent figure in the Jewish community of the Netherlands. Based on the testimony³³ of the *ex-converso* Antonio de Montezino, who had first-hand knowledge of an Israelite presence in the Americas, ben Israel was influenced by the account.³⁴ He then began his own thorough examination of the theory in

³⁰ Fenton, Elizabeth. *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. United States: NYU Press, 2020: 44.

³¹ Segev, Ran. "Sephardic *Conquistadores* in a New World: Menashe Ben Israel on the 'Rediscovery' of the Lost Tribes." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 138. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899563>.

³² The letter included Marrano's account along with an affidavit from the rabbi. In later editions of Thorowgood's work, the publication included both parts of the manuscript.

³³ Antonio de Montezino was a Portuguese traveler and a Marrano Jew. After a trip to Ecuador, and returning to Judaism in 1644, he related to the community of the Netherlands his encounter in the Americas. In the Andes Mountains, Montezino claimed, were members of the lost tribe of Reuben. He witnessed the community reciting the Shema (the fundamental verse of Jewish liturgy). This idea then was further supported by reports from the New World of discoveries of buildings resembling synagogues and non-European, bearded white men.

³⁴ As ben Israel wrote in his preface, "It is hard to say what is certaine among the so many, and so uncertaine opinions concerning the originall of the Indians of the new World. If you aske, what is my opinion upon the relation of Montezinus, I must say, it is scarce possible to know it by any Art, since there is no demonstration, which can manifest the truth of it; much lesse can you gather it from Divine, or humane Writings; for the Scriptures doe not tell what people first inhabited those

1648.³⁵ While the lost tribes of Israel were sustained in the Jewish imagination—in particular, in the Middle Ages, by famed traveler Benjamin of Tudela—ben Israel's work was “the most authoritative and complete treatise on the topic.”³⁶ Published in 1649,³⁷ *The Hope of Israel* was the complete treatise which schematized the dispersion of the Israelites into the New World and their future reparation in Israel.

In forty-one sections, his work spoke of the interconnection between the course of Jewish history, as prescribed by God, and apocalypticism. Analyzing the cultures of the Jews and autochthonous peoples of the Americas, ben Israel made a claim for indigenous communities as members of the lost tribes. He collected material “regarding the tribes’ possible location, cited classical and contemporary geographers and historians, covered every Jewish source... [and] cited Christian authors.”³⁸

In opposition to Thorowgood, ben Israel weaponized the theory as a tool for Jewish messianism. Considering the theory's relationship to the socio-religious conditions of European Jewry in the early-modern period, ben Israel buttressed faith in the coming redemptive state.

Exile, for ben Israel, was an elective decision by the tribes of Israel so that they could preserve and maintain Mosaic Law in “extremely hostile conditions.”³⁹ He dismissed the notion that they could have lost “their own language entirely,” or that, above all, they could have lost Judaism “which beyond their homeland, they kept with great care.”⁴⁰

According to the rabbi, the Israelites elected to leave to a remote land in order to practice their religion freely. He emphasized that the tribes, despite being disconnected from the Jewish world, were in keeping with biblical

Countries; neither was there mention of them by any, til Christop. Columbus, Americus, Vespacius, Ferdinandus, Cortez, the Marquesse Del Valle, and Franciscus Pizarrus went thither; and though hitherto I have been of this minde, that I would speake only of solid, and infallible things, (as those things are which concerne our Law) and the obscurity of the matter, making me doubt, whether it would be worth a while for me to attempt it; yet at last I was content to be perswaded to it, not that I looke to get credit by it, but that my friends, and all who seeke for truth, that have put me upon this work, may see how very desirous I am to please them."

³⁵ Persuaded by Montezino, ben Israel began work on his polemic. As he wrote in his introduction, In this Treatise is shewed the place where the ten Tribes at this present are, proved, partly by the strange relation of one Antony Montezimus, a Jew, of what befell him as he travelled over the Mountaines Cordillaere, with

divers other particulars about the restoration of the Jewes, and the time when."

³⁶ Segev, Ran. “Sephardic *Conquistadores* in a New World: Menashe Ben Israel on the ‘Rediscovery’ of the Lost Tribes.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 125. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899563>.

³⁷ Published originally in Latin and Spanish, the composition was later translated in 1652 into English.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 118.

and talmudic tradition.⁴¹ With such a tradition, it was irreconcilable for ben Israel to attribute indigenous peoples' lives to the notion that they had abandoned their covenant with God. In *The Hope of Israel*, he asserted that rather than being lost to God, as the Christians assumed, the natives were lost to the known world. Consequently, the only rectification to exile was continued confidence in the eschaton.

Holding to this position, ben Israel explained away the paganistic practices of the indigenous peoples, thus affirming Jewish continuity. He claimed, despite the seemingly array of cultural evidence in the Americas of Israelite origin, that only a small portion of the communities themselves were Israelite.⁴² This small subsection consisted, accordingly, of practicing Jews wholly in conformity with Jewish tradition. The widespread practices of burial, circumcision, purity laws, and knowledge of the creation of the world and the Flood, were, therefore, only, a consequence of contact with, and adaptation from, the Israelites.⁴³

Confronting his Christian peers, willing to believe the account of Montezino and the Israelites as the first settlers of the Americas, ben Israel could not accept the eschatological principle of the degradation of Israel.⁴⁴ As such, while sustaining the theory, ben Israel concurrently preserved Jewish tradition and the image of a hastening messianic age.

While the *Hope of Israel* lacked any element of proselytization, and its relevance in the New World was limited to the abstract, it was palpably felt in Jewish spheres of the Old World. For ben Israel, the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory prompted a twofold response for Jews. A product of Christian dispossession himself, his account of the reemergence of the Israelites was directly suited for Jewish communities throughout the diaspora.⁴⁵ Jews — Askenazim and Sephardim, who were widely dispersed throughout Europe and Asia by the 1650s — would have been comforted by the notion of the faithful Israelites who could remain Jews “distant, foreign lands.”⁴⁶ The conditions of native peoples would have resonated with their own lives, when mass conversion, persecution, and the

⁴¹ Based in the Jewish tradition, in both the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, the tribes of Israel were intended to ultimately reunite with Judah. Legends regarding the tribes of Israel began as early as the Second Temple Period and continued into the Late Middle Ages.

⁴² For ben Israel, there had, in fact, been two crossings into the continent along the strait of Anian, first a migration by Gentiles followed by a migration of Israelites.

⁴³ Segev, Ran. “Sephardic *Conquistadores* in a New World: Menashe Ben Israel on the ‘Rediscovery’ of the Lost Tribes.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 132. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899563>.

⁴⁴ Menasseh ben Israel asserted in his treatise that the European colonizers “generally believed that the Indians came from the ten tribes, but they are clearly incorrect... yet, since then, as was the case with the Spaniards, new peoples from the East Indies arrived.”

⁴⁵ Segev, Ran. “Sephardic *Conquistadores* in a New World: Menashe Ben Israel on the ‘Rediscovery’ of the Lost Tribes.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 4 (2018): 141. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26899563>.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

diaspora were the reality. While continued faith was necessary, ben Israel used the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory as a means to give hope to hastening the End of Days.

Specifically, in 1651, ben Israel attempted to convince the English government and Oliver Cromwell to readmit Jews to Britain.⁴⁷ Presenting his findings, he petitioned them to abrogate the Edict of Expulsion of 1290 which prohibited Jews from living in England. Based on biblical prophecy, ben Israel claimed that the Jews needed to be dispersed to “the four corners of the earth” in order for the messianic period to begin. He further maintained that settlement in England would ensure “all which things of necessity must be fulfilled, for Israel at last being brought back to his owne place; peace which is promised under the Messiah.” As such, Jewish dispersion in the Americas was a providential mirror of the experience of Jewry in Europe and Asia. Fitting with the greater framework, the Jews dispersed in the Old and New Worlds would ultimately be redeemed in the messianic age (through the ‘hope’ in a return to England).

Concluding Thoughts

The Israelite-AmeriIndian hypothesis—that the “New World,” and its people, were merely lost to history—alleviated the essential theological tensions caused by the discovery of the Americas. As alluded in the prophetic tradition, the Americas, and those who inhabited it, were primed for religious appropriation. For Thorowgood, the Israelite AmeriIndian theory provided three solutions: (I) the conversion of the Israelite Indians now acted as a prelude to the coming of the millennium; (II) since indigenous communities were Israelite in origin, their Christianizing would be given priority in the Christian apocalypticism; (III) it indicated that the natives had once been both civilized and God-fearing and they, therefore, needed to be restored to this status. For ben Israel, the AmeriIndians’ Israelite ancestry fulfilled the rabbinic interpretation of the Israelite exile: the lost tribes had to be dispersed to the “ends of the earth” before they could be recalled to Israel for the establishment of the messianic kingdom. Both Thomas Thorowgood and Menasseh ben Israel accounted for the autochthonous peoples, explained their absence from history, and situated them within their respective “eschatological timeline[s].”⁴⁸

For Europeans, adjusting to the realities of a new global era, the championing of the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory symbolized an ever-changing religious landscape for the Abrahamic faiths. In a period of

⁴⁷ The Hope of Israel’s English edition was dedicated to the “To The Parliament, The Supream Court of England, And to the Right Honourable the Councell of State, Menasseh Ben Israel, prays God to give Health, and all happinesse.”

⁴⁸ Fenton, Elizabeth. *Old Canaan in a New World: Native Americans and the Lost Tribes of Israel*. United States: NYU Press, 2020: 11.

heightened competition of foreign nations in America, concurrent to social, economic, and religious upheavals in Europe, the necessity to preserve and buttress tradition was apparent. The discovery of the Americas gave a new impulse to this sentiment. The theory, in turn, expressed and reified European, Judeo-Christian self-preservation.

Despite this common principle, undergirding their respective works was an argument regarding providential destiny and its millenarian implications. Thorowgood's conception necessitated the proselytization in the Americas to bring about the Second Coming. Menasseh ben Israel advocated for a response in the Old World; the Americas, inversely, was a passive process as part of the greater diasporic narrative. These opposing interpretations of the Israelite myth demonstrated a divergent understanding of the consequence and purpose of colonialism, as reflected in their antithetical understandings of the role of indigenous Americans in their eschatological views.

Thus, *Jewes in America* and *The Hope of Israel* engendered a perspective of how both Christians and Jews conceived of the discovery and conquest of the Americas in the seventeenth century. The appropriation of the American continent into the Israelite-AmeriIndian theory created a continuum between the biblical world and the Western Hemisphere (by providing contact for the *uncontacted*). It was, in truth, a religious debate framed in traditional theological terms expressed in a colonialist attitude. As such, these two works defined a relatively minor, but important, idea in the Abrahamic messianic metanarrative: its notions of lostness, exile, and salvation through the arrival of Europeans in the New World and their colonization of its peoples.