

A Curious Congregationalist:

The Rev. J Idrisyn Jones and British Israelism

*...the Revd. J. Idrisyn Jones...has just passed away at the age of 81. The death occurred at Kenilworth. The deceased gentleman had been in the Congregational ministry for 55 years...He was a strong temperance advocate and a 'Good Templar.'*¹

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At first glance this unremarkable obituary, recording the death of a Congregational minister, published in a provincial newspaper in the midst of the Great War, does not excite much of interest. Indeed, it suggests that J. Idrisyn Jones led a relatively uneventful life in which the pursuit of his vocation formed the dominant part. In fact, what is most interesting about this obituary is what is omitted. It is true that Jones had taken for his vocation the Congregational ministry, but for the last twenty-six years of his life he had also taken on the mantle of principal evangelist for the cause of British Israelism. And it was in discharging this duty that he would journey around the British Isles, to the far-flung corners of the British Empire and across the Atlantic to America. This paper seeks to shine a light on the reasons why an apparently conscientious Congregational minister and temperance advocate should quite suddenly be at the head of a movement which sought to propagate an unorthodox interpretation of Biblical truth which, in many ways, undermined the relevance of his own denomination.

Since its emergence as an organised movement in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there have only been a handful of serious studies into British Israelism as a socio-religious phenomenon: little more than an article, a chapter in a collected edition and a published PhD thesis. This makes analysis of those like Jones who had taken a leading position in the movement during what might be called its heyday an important contribution towards forming a better understanding of this most peculiar of movements. A focus on Jones has an additional layer of interest. What work that had been done on the subject suggests that British Israelism was far more appealing to Anglicans than to Nonconformists. What was happening within Nonconformity that could have driven an able pastor to embrace the message of British Israelism?

John Idrisyn Jones was born to John Jones (formerly Humffrey) (1804-1887) and his wife Elizabeth at Llanidloes in 1835, the eldest of five sons.² Jones's later penchant for advocacy and public ministry

¹ I would like to thank Prof Clyde Binfield, Prof David Bebbington and Prof Peter Catterall for their invaluable insights and assistance during the course of researching this paper.

The International Order of the Good Templars was a society which advocated complete abstinence from alcohol, and later evolved into a pressure group campaigning for the restriction in the traffic of alcohol and the shortening of licensing hours. Originally founded in America around 1851, the first British fraternity was established in Birmingham in 1873. D. Harrison & F. Lomax, *Freemasonry & Fraternal Societies* (Surrey, Lewis Masonic: 2015), pp. 11-12.

² 'The Revd. J. Idrisyn Jones, Death of an aged Minister' *The Brecon and Radnor Express* (Thursday 28th December, 1916).

was inherited from a father who enjoyed an eclectic career. The elder Jones began his working life as an apprentice to Richard Jones (whose name he adopted), the printer and publisher of the Welsh Wesleyan journal *Yr Eurgrawn*. He went on to establish his own printing and publishing operation, again where he managed all of the output of literature for the Welsh Wesleyans. He was a town councillor and Mayor of Llanidloes (1847-48), as well as a local preacher. However, it would appear that, like his son after him, John Jones was unsettled in his theological disposition. In 1853, he sloughed off his Wesleyan allegiance and defected to Anglicanism. Ordained to the diaconate in September of the same year, he was appointed to the parish of Llandysiliogogo, in Ceredigion, in 1858. He continued to publish pamphlets and sermons, but “...his chief work...and [the] best known to the public at large [was]...the popular *Welsh Commentary on the Bible* in five volumes, which [at the time of his death in 1887 was] in its eighth edition. Over 80,000 copies of this publication [had been] sold in Britain and America – a scale unprecedented, perhaps, in the history of Welsh books.”³ In 1881, in recognition of his services to Welsh literature (which included a Welsh translation of Queen Victoria’s *Journal of Our Life in the Highlands*), Jones was awarded a Civil List pension of £50.00 per annum on the recommendation of William Gladstone. He also obtained the bardic name Idrisyn; the diminutive form of Idris, the legendary Welsh giant.⁴

From what little information there is on his formative years, it is tempting to speculate that the younger Jones felt ill at ease, maybe even actively hostile, to his father’s decision to abandon Wesleyanism for the emoluments and status of the Established Church. An indication of this is the twenty-two-year-old Jones’s decision to enter the dissenting ministry, being accepted at Hackney Academy (also known as Hackney Theological College) in 1855. His decision to follow a Congregational, rather than Wesleyan, call to ministry may reflect a feeling that his father’s change of allegiance might have affected his own Methodist calling; he felt more at ease in choosing the Congregational ministry and the relative strength of Congregationalism within central Wales (close to where he was brought up) may have helped to convince him that this offered a more promising path to ministry. This can only be hypothesis but it suggests that the child was father of the man – as well as his father’s son.

Completing his instruction at Hackney in 1858, Jones began full-time ministry in Brecon (where he served as an assistant) before going to serve in pastorates in Everton (1861-1874), Pentonville (1875-1876), Newport (1883-1886), Birkenhead (1887-1888),* Rodborough (1888-1890),* Croach Hill (1890-1892),* Muswell Hill (1892-1893),* Welshpool (1893-1900),* Northampton (1901)* and Kenilworth (1905-1909).⁵ After Kenilworth, Jones is recorded as having moved to Cardiff where he remained out of charge between 1910 and 1914, the year in which he formally retired. During the course of his fifty-five years in ministry Jones was supported by his wife Annie Sophia, with whom he had at least four children (two sons and two daughters). In addition to his ministry, Jones was variously described as an author (he wrote at least two biographies of minor figures within Nonconformity and published pamphlets on the Nonconformist tradition, on baptism and on Spiritualism), Biblical expositor and a ready advocate for the principal causes associated with Nonconformity: temperance (he was a member of the International Order of the Good Templars),

² D. L. Thomas, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)
<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-15045> (accessed 23rd June, 2018).

³ ‘The Death of the Rev. J. Jones (Idrisyn)’ *The South Wales Daily News* (Friday 19th August, 1887).

⁴ This title would be handed down to the younger Jones, in keeping with the bardic tradition.

⁵ * Indicates that Jones served as an Assistant Pastor, likely non-stipendiary as only larger Congregational Chapels could afford to maintain more than one full-time minister.

the expansion of non-denominational education and disestablishment (certainly in his native Wales). Given the number of different communities he served throughout his ministry, many of them in a non-stipendiary capacity, it is likely that Jones was already a man of some private means (there is no evidence to suggest that he was disinherited by his father) and he therefore possessed a degree of independence to pursue other interests. This would explain how Jones was able to dedicated much of his adult life to the Anglo (and later British) Israel Association.⁶ From at least 1889,⁷ Jones published articles and delivered lectures up and down the country to the provincial branches of this relatively young organisation. This would take him to Ireland, and then, after 1899, to church halls and assembly rooms across Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the United States and the West Indies. With a preaching style described as of “...the sweetest, most winning manner...with a highly cultivated voice...”⁸ Jones propagated British Israel with the passion of the convert. As Vice-President and Ambassador-at-Large of the Association, Jones saw no conflict of principle in combining Congregational ministry with an entirely unorthodox expression of Biblical ‘truth.’ However, for twenty-six years Jones reconciled these two callings.

British Israelism is form of Biblical revisionism which emphasises the literal interpretation of the Abrahamic (or Old) Covenant from whence the evidential narrative of a chosen people would begin. This deviated significantly from orthodox Biblical scholarship in attempting to prove the direct and physical manifestation of the Old Covenant in the reality of the nineteenth century. Yet, from the time of the theory’s modern inception in 1840, it was an...

*...a priori identification in that the end result was ordained from the start...British Israelism exerted relatively little effort in tracing this descent step by step...rather it began with the confirmed view that the British were racial Israelites and thus concentrated on finding every piece of evidence which might substantiate this supposition.*⁹

Much of the evidence supporting this theory was highly speculative, since, even from the starting point of a literal interpretation of the Biblical narrative, the fate of the northern tribes of Israel after the Assyrian invasion and their being taken into captivity (as recorded in the Book of Chronicles 5:26) is “...lost to recorded history.”¹⁰ Yet, for British Israelists, this “...gap in historical knowledge is regarded as of crucial importance.”¹¹ It is cited as evidence that the promises made by God to Abraham remain unfulfilled; they are yet to come to pass. And, the historical void allowed theorists to construct a narrative from scratch. Through a combination of philological studies and the piecing

⁶ Originally founded as the Anglo-Israel Association in 1874, it would later merge with another Israelist organisation to form that British-Israel Association in 1889. Under the direction of former imperial civil servant Edward Wheeler Bird, the organisation maintained an affiliated branch structure which was loosely grouped under a central committee based in London (the Metropolitan British-Israel Association). From 1880, the Association appointed the Viscount Folkestone MP (Jacob Pleydell-Bouverie, son of the Earl of Radnor) as President, and a number of high-profile Vice-Presidents including Jonathan Titcombe, Lord Bishop of Rangoon.

⁷ *The Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazetteer* (24th January, 1889) advertising a lecture by Jones on the Abrahamic Covenant, this is the earliest reference that I can find linking Jones and British Israelism.

⁸ Mary J. Anderson (ed.), *The Life Writings of Mary Baker McQuesten: Victorian Matriarch* (Ontario, Wilfrid Laurier University Press: 2004), p. 85.

⁹ Eric M. Reisenauer, *British-Israel: Racial Identity in Imperial Britain, 1870-1920* (PhD Thesis, Loyola University, Chicago: 1997), p. 95.

¹⁰ J. Wilson, *British Israelism: The Ideological Restraints on Sect Organisation* et al Bryan. R. Wilson (ed.) *Patterns of Sectarianism: Organisation and Ideology in Social and Religious Movements* (Heinemann, London: 1967), p.346.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 347.

together of fragmentary references to the lost tribes found in the apocryphal Book of Esdras¹² and in Herodotus, British Israelists proved to their own satisfaction that the captive Israelites left Assyrian lands, moved north into what is now southern Russia before migrating westwards to become the progenitors of the modern British people. It was the British who were the heirs to the Abrahamic Covenant and would see the world brought under the reign of God. His chosen instrument was Britain. Her Empire was the proof that the prophecy was coming to fruition.

British Israelism seldom features in the history of Nonconformity. What evidence there is suggests that its chief appeal was to Anglicans. It is possible that an apparent lack of interest in such theological speculations a reflection of Nonconformity's greater cultural and theological cohesiveness during the period. This was in contrast to an Established Church which was in retreat in many areas and corporately plagued by division (often manifesting itself as a battle between the Evangelical and the Anglo-Catholic wings of the Church). British Israelism typically spoke to those who sought to recover their self-confidence and the reassurance of their place in the world; it spoke to those in society whose once unassailable position, socially and morally, seemed under threat from economic changes and the imperial reverses of the 1850s-onwards. For Nonconformists, this sense of being an embattled minority was nothing new. Indeed, it was from such a mindset that those outside of the Anglican Church had drawn strength and security and, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the confidence to challenge the Established hegemony.

But this fails to take into account the ways in which Nonconformity itself was being undermined from within as a reformist agenda challenged some of its fundamental tenets after 1880. There was a 'counter-revolution of values' arising from dissatisfaction with simplistic notions of progress. As noted in John Waddington's contemporary history of Congregationalism "...outside the circle of the churches comprehended in the Congregational Union, a number of gifted men had for some time...advocated Congregational Reform."¹³ Waddington cites Edward Miall as one of those men, pointing to a passage in his *British Churches in Relation to the British People*;

Had the churches generally, by preaching and by practice, addressed the message of God by His Son more to the moral sympathies of men, and less to their sense of personal interest – had the tastes quickened and fostered in them been those conversant with, and terminating upon, rightness rather than advantage – had the paramount idea they brought to bear upon the world been that of the transcendently glorious character of God as imaged in Jesus Christ – instead of the benefit accruing to men from the mediatorial work – they would have diffused around them an atmosphere of thought and sentiment which instead of hardening the unsubdued into indifference and recklessness would have progressively mellowed them into susceptibility of impression.¹⁴

I would suggest that it was this reconfiguration of values took amongst leading figures across the denominations that provided an explanation for why J. Idrisyn Jones, until 1889-90, a solid defender of Congregational values, was converted to the message of British Israel. Jones was one of a handful of Nonconformists who were declared supporters of the movement. E.M. Reisenauer, in his thesis

¹² An alternative version of 2 Chronicles, 35:1-36:23, all of Ezra and Nehemiah, 7:38-8:12. Not included in the Vulgate or later Protestant editions of the Bible but acknowledged as a canonical book by the Greek Orthodox Church. Source: M.A. Powell (ed.) *Bible Dictionary* (New York, Harper Collins: 2011), p. 256.

¹³ John Waddington D.D, *Congregational History, 1850-1880* (Longmans, London: 1880), p. 134.

¹⁴ Edward Miall, *The British Churches in Relation to the British People* (Arthur Hall, Virtue and Company, London: 1849), p. 154.

on British Israel, lists the following as known members of the cause: the Revd. Henry Roe (1842-1920), the Revd. Mark Guy Pearse (1842-1930) and the Revd. Dinsdale T. Young (1861-1938). All were Methodists. Reisenauer recorded only one other Congregational minister to have committed himself to the cause: Joseph T. Wild (1834-1908). Moving young from Lancashire to Canada, Wild would go on to preach in New York as well as across his vast adoptive homeland. Indeed, according to the Canadian newspaper *The Daily Mail*, Wild was considered to be "...the most popular preacher in Toronto [in 1891]...often attracting more than 3,000 people to hear his Identity [British Israel] sermons."¹⁵ Putting aside their denominational differences, it is possible to argue that all shared a critical attitude to the reformist agenda that was beginning to take hold, hence their attraction to British Israel.

Its attractiveness appears to have been its ability to provide a radical alternative vision of human and divine society, whilst also reinforcing traditional Nonconformist doctrine. British Israelism offered the believer a chance to be part of an 'elect' once again. But it did this in such a way as to negate many of the changes wrought by the changing socio-economic environment of the late nineteenth century. This can be shown by Jones's first recorded publication on the subject in 1890 when he contributed a chapter to *British Israel Truth*, the handbook of the movement, in which he attempted to rebut a number of theological objections to the theory.¹⁶ The apparent ease with which Jones was able to make this journey might be explained by reference to his own reflections on the advantages for the believer in British Israelism, expressed in his *Anglo-Israelism in Australasia*.¹⁷ Faith in the British Israel message:

*...brings God to the front. The people who have accepted this Truth ever remember Him as the source of all their blessings...That is the condition in which nations thrive and prosper. In our creed we have the safeguard against those perils which make a godless community.*¹⁸

*It results in the study of the Bible...Scripture and history make the two poles of our system, and must be studied together, for prophecy is but history in anticipation...We have the joy of sending people back to their Bibles.*¹⁹

*It removes the burden of national anxiety. To many of the nations today, the outlook is most unpromising; ...the hand-writing is seen upon the wall speaking of ruin and decay. But none of these tragic voices speak to an Anglo-Israel nation.*²⁰

*It destroys the sense of isolation. An Anglo-Israel nation never can be left severely alone. Sister-nations beckon her to their sympathy and love, to make one great and united family.*²¹

One can use these quotations to identify how British Israelism appeared to an answer the controversies within Nonconformity which had apparently alienated Jones. The claim of "bringing

¹⁵ Long Ministry Ended: Dr. Joseph Wild is Dead, *The Evening Telegraph (Toronto)* (19th August, 1908).

¹⁶ J. Idrisyn Jones et al Archdeacon Denis Hanan & H. Aldersmith, *British-Israel Truth 14th Edition* (Covenant Publishing Co, London: 1932), p. 148.

¹⁷ Published in the guise of a report on his mission there on behalf of the Anglo-Israel Association.

¹⁸ The Revd. J Idrisyn Jones, *Anglo-Israelism in Australasia in 1899* (London, Robert Banks & Son: 1899), pp. 22-23.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 23.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

God to the front” and of “sending people back to their Bibles” can be read as a criticism of the interest which some leading Nonconformist figures took in Incarnational and contextual theology from the 1870s. For most of the nineteenth century Nonconformity held to an Evangelicalism which was optimistic in its emphasis on the human ability to achieve success in this life and salvation in the next; the only condition was “conversion,” that “...moment of change when the light flooded the empty vessel and regeneration occurred.”²² It was the point where one moved from darkness to light, from sin to glory. However, from the late 1870s this spirit of optimism gave way to a more serious consideration of those who seemed to form the perpetually damned in society. Led by a number of senior Nonconformists, many of whom had been influenced by Romanticism, there was a re-examination of orthodox views on damnation promoting a more contextual understanding of God’s plan. This changing interpretation of the theology of grace was associated with a renewed emphasis on the “Fatherhood of God.” “God as a slightly indulgent Father began to replace God the judge who demanded the atonement of Christ and required faith and moral effort on the part of man.”²³ As a sermon topic the “Fatherhood of God” became popular because it permitted preachers to speak about the brotherhood of man.

In other words, the spirit of enterprise, technological advancement, and economic development, the Protestant-tinged zeitgeist of the nineteenth century, was now to be seen as the idol whose veneration had led to the sacrifice of the aesthetic and the humane. Industrial success “...had been purchased at too great a price.”²⁴ The extent of the shift by the late 1880s was such that W. R. Nicoll, editor of *The British Weekly* (the leading Free Church publication of the time), posited that the “...increasing rejection of the doctrine of eternal punishment was the most significant development in the theology of contemporary Nonconformity.”²⁵ Christ the Incarnate Man came to replace Christ the Saviour (that is one who suffers a propitiatory sacrifice) as the model of atonement.

For Jones this interest in Incarnationism seemed to strike at the heart of his faith. Jones defined his faith, and Nonconformity in general, quite clearly in his pamphlet *Why are we Nonconformists?* (1881):

*[Nonconformity]...is not founded on a question of a mere difference of taste, but on conscience...It is the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ which separates us from Churchmen. It is this fact which led the earlier Nonconformists to endure their terrible persecutions and sufferings, and which leads modern Nonconformists to incur the loss of social prestige...they [the past generation] ...are yet speaking, bidding us to be valiant for the truth; to suffer, if needs be for righteousness.*²⁶

This belief in the need for sacrifice and struggle was reinforced by Jones’ strong adherence to pre-millennialism.²⁷ A year before the publication of *Why are we Nonconformists?* Jones set out his

²² Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad & Dangerous People, England: 1783-1846* (Oxford, OUP: 2008), p. 176.

²³ Gerald Parsons (ed.), *Religion in Victorian Britain, IV Interpretations* (Manchester, Manchester University Press: 1988), p. 84.

²⁴ D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Oxford, Routledge: 2002), pp. 166-167.

²⁵ W. B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists and Higher Criticism in the Nineteenth Century* (Independent Press: 1954), p. 92.

²⁶ J Idrisyn Jones, *Why are we Nonconformists?* (W. Jones, Newport: 1881), p. 6.

arguments in favour of this position in *A Catechism on the Second Advent; and the Revealed Future of the Church and the World*. In the dedicatory note, addressed to Capt The Hon. R. Moreton, the convenor of the Second Advent Conferences at Mildmay Park Hall, "...I am glad to know that we are identical in our opinions, as to the Advent of the Lord being *pre-millennial*, and that He will not long delay His coming."²⁸ Jones considered the pre-millennial position to be the doctrine most closely aligned to that held by the primitive church, but, obscured by the Catholic Church, it was not rediscovered until the Reformation. However, "...since it was thus revived again...how has it become so widely ignored at the present day?"²⁹ The answer: "...the notion of a speedy advent is not welcome to an age so absorbed by worldly pleasures and pursuits, which embraces therefore, the more popular view [of post-millennialism]."³⁰ But, asking why it was important to believe in the pre-millennial Advent, Jones made the case that, "...it is calculated to exert a most salutary influence upon our character, rendering it more earnest and consecrated, and producing in us that constant watchfulness so emphatically enjoined by the Saviour."³¹ Thus the doctrine could be justified on the basis of its effective application to humanity, as well as in a purer theological sense. To the pre-millennialist, the pursuit of earthly pleasures was slowly drowning the world in "...wickedness and chaos, like Babylon or Sodom and Gomorrah"³² but this was necessary so that the full transformative power of the Second Advent could be brought to bear on mankind and "... 'the light of a morning which is to know no night breaks gloriously forth.'"³³ Those who stood to reap the greatest reward from this transforming power were those few who actively sought to transcend the pleasures of this world in favour of a life of order and piety. Nonconformists believed themselves to represent this 'Godly minority.' They became associated with the virtues of strength, high moral discipline and optimism and with the promotion of equality of opportunity. These were the values most strongly associated with the entrepreneurial and aspirational new men, men who were outside the pale of 'respectable (Anglican) English society, represented most prominently among the professionals, the small businessmen and the skilled working class. Those like the metal broker and Quaker Albert Fox, memorialised by Jones in 1867 in *The Devout Merchant*, who succeeded in combining "...a life of personal holiness beyond the common stamp"³⁴ with that of hard work.

The reorientation of the Evangelical tradition undermined the foundations of this individual and corporate identity. Adherents to the Dissenting denominations were historically a persecuted minority. This mentality was fundamental to the creation of a Nonconformist sense identity; to be a Nonconformist was to share in the suffering of faith. This gave the doctrine of the "elect" fresh relevance, in it was to be found the persecuted Nonconformists' consolation, the principle justification for their sacrifice on earth. Nonconformists had foregone the rewards of the earth and been set apart as true adherents of the Gospel. Their sacrifice placed them among God's chosen people. They were a superior community. It was their duty to demonstrate to the world the transformative power of faith. It was this which provided the comprehensive experience of faith, satisfying the need for a complete physical and psychological sense of self and purpose. An end to

²⁷ Pre-millennialists believed that only with the Second Coming will the Kingdom of Heaven be established on earth (Christ must come first, hence 'pre'). The opposing view is that of Post-millennialism which envisages Christ returning to an earth as the culmination of man's success in building the new Jerusalem.

²⁸ J Idrisyn Jones, *A Catechism on the Second Advent; and the Revealed Future of the Church and the World* (1880), p. 1.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 7.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Boyd Hilton, *A Mad, Bad & Dangerous People? England 1783-1846* (OUP, Oxford: 2008), p. 401.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ J Idrisyn Jones, *Albert Fox, The Devout Merchant: A Memoir* (Edward Howell, Liverpool: 1867), p. vii.

Nonconformity's "elect" status and a new emphasis on Incarnationism brought about the abandonment of this element of Nonconformist identity. The "Downgrade" controversy among the Baptists represents the most significant example of the "orthodox" reaction to changes within the Evangelical tradition. Failing similar fractures in Methodism or Congregationalism it may be possible that Jones and others looked to British Israelism as a means to defend "true religion" from within their existing denominational structures. Indeed, a powerful case for the apparently positive impact that British Israelism might have had in restoring the transformative power of Nonconformity was recounted by Henry Roe, a Primitive Methodist minister, who was appointed as superintendent to the St. Ives Circuit in 1883. Since the closure of the tin mines, many families had left the area in search of work elsewhere. Of those who remained, mostly fishermen and labourers, many were only just surviving. The circuit was in severe financial difficulties due to the dearth of those attending chapel, and the poverty of the few who did seek religious consolation. It was to turn this situation around that Roe was appointed to St. Ives:

*Night by night I walked alone on the Portminster beach to meditate and form my plans, and there I believe my Sunday morning plan was born. Though I had never ventured the like before, and had but little preparation, I publicly announced that I would explain a Scripture lesson on the British Race, Colonies and Empire, as Israel, to the St. Ives congregation every Sabbath morning as long as I remained in the town...*³⁵

The result was gratifying...

*Fishermen, sea captains, and working men attended in numbers not seen for quite some time. And so, instead of a nearly empty church, was a good-sized congregation, composed chiefly of men, looking like one vast Bible class. Thus, were spent forty-two out of fifty-two Sunday mornings of my first year at Cornwall.*³⁶

What British Israelism offered was a medium through which to address this breach within Nonconformity and the nation at large. The loss of faith in the ability of self-help and free enterprise to deliver positive change within society was met by British Israel's riposte that the overwhelming majority of socio-economic problems confronting British society were in fact the sole product of an externalised agent – often defined as "foreign" – which had been introduced into society through the changes wrought by modernity, those "the perils which make a godless community." The real antidote to the many issues confronting the nation lay in the need to "bring God to the front;" that is to bring the truth of the British Israel racial identity to wider knowledge. For in this was the means to preserve Nonconformity's historical attachment to individual moral responsibility by casting individuals as innocent victims of alien influences which sought to intentionally compromise their moral character by nefarious means. At the same time, it advocated an alternative remedy which allowed for the avoidance of contentious fault lines (for example, the burgeoning capital vs. labour argument which incarnational theology tended to magnify) and presented a new focus for loyalty: common identity as Israel.

But this common identity did more than address the need for a new focus of unity in Nonconformity. It went some way in soothing the developing "national anxiety." A series of British military reverses which had been inflicted by supposedly inferior forces (the Crimea, the Indian Mutiny, the First

³⁵ The Revd. Henry Roe, *Ministry and Identity* et al *Anglo-Israel Almanack for the Year 1886* (1887), p. 46.

³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 47.

Anglo-Boer War, the Zulu War), combined with the growing economic powers of Germany and America, had started to fracture Britain's sense of supremacy on the world stage. The cumulative effect of this led commentators and policy-makers into a bout of critical introspection as they tried to identify the causes of such reverses. Greater attention began to be paid to the moral and physical condition (to a certain extent these were considered indivisible), of the urban masses. A particular focus of these investigations was the failure of self-help and voluntarism to alter the life-chances of the city-dwelling poor. Here, British Israelism offered a way of explaining a number of social realities. It did not dismiss the possibility that it was the poor physical and moral condition of British men which explained why Britain had met with defeat abroad, but cited the root cause as "foreign" corrupting influences eroding the traditional British fighting spirit. Interestingly this analysis did not extend to the most damaging of contemporary social evils: alcoholism.

A commitment to temperance had developed as a part of Nonconformity's social programme from the mid-century. This commitment was shared by Jones who was an active figure within several temperance organisations (the UK Alliance and the International Order of the Good Templars in particular) and the author of a grim statistical analysis of the impact of alcoholism in Liverpool. *The Slain in Liverpool by Drink*, detailed those who had died in Liverpool in the course of a year (published intermittently in 1863, 1864, 1866 and 1869 during Jones's time as a minister in the city) whose deaths were somehow attributable to alcohol. This must have had an impact on the broader temperance movement within the city as its historians make particular note of this work:

During the months of February and March, 1867, The Liverpool Mercury³⁷ contained a series of articles by the Revd. John I Jones, of Kirkdale,³⁸ on The Slain in Liverpool by Drink, in which he gave some harrowing details of the doings of the drinking system in Liverpool during the year 1866. These articles were afterwards published in pamphlet form.³⁹

Horried by what he had witnessed amongst the poor in Liverpool, Jones remained an advocate of the temperance movement throughout his life, but what makes this interesting in the context of his later role within British Israel was the fact that opposition to widespread drunkenness did not quite fit British Israel's narrative. This was acknowledged by the early leader of the Anglo-Israel Association, Edward Hine, who wrote that "...Britain is a stronghold of drunkenness and calls forth the indignation of the Almighty" and "...It is the curse of England – few crimes have so impoverished our country."⁴⁰ However, to concede this flaw in the national character was to undermine the claim of the divinely appointed moral and racial superiority of the British people. So, in order to protect their arguments, British Israelism cited Biblical evidence that drunkenness was in fact just another sign of Britain's 'elect' status. Hine again; "[God said] 'Woe unto the drunkards of Ephraim...The drunkards of Ephraim are the drunkards of Israel and we are identical with that people...[therefore] God himself recognises that among the people of Israel there are many drunkards.'"⁴¹ It would seem that this attempt at reconciling an awkward social reality with the British Israel narrative seemed good enough to keep the arch-teetotaler Jones on side as evidenced in an report in the *Montgomeryshire Echo*: "On Thurs week in the Congregational Church (Welshpool), the Revd J

³⁷ Founded in 1811, *The Liverpool Mercury* was, from 1858, a Liberal/reformist leaning daily with a circulation that included large parts of Lancashire, Cheshire, Wales, the Isle of Man and London.

³⁸ An area that was later associated with a strong Conservative 'Orange Vote.'

³⁹ P.T. Winskill and Joseph Thomas, *History of the Temperance Movement in Liverpool & District* (Joseph Thomas, Liverpool: 1887), p. 71.

⁴⁰ Edward Hine, 'The Sin of Drunkenness,' *The Banner of Israel* (1876), p. 6.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Idrisyn Jones...lectured on *Are the British People Descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel*...certain characteristics were to mark the people...they were to be a drunken nation.”⁴² It was clear that the failure of traditional Evangelical efforts in promoting moral reform through the encouragement of individual responsibility was not due to any inherent failings in the principle of self-help, but made necessary, at least in terms of drunkenness, by the will of God. Jones felt that the Biblical justification did not however negate the need to encourage those who were “the drunken nation” to give up the drink.

While it was possible to find Biblical sanction (and absolution) for the evil wrought on society by drink, this did not mean that British Israelists were entirely at ease with the more general socio-cultural direction of society during the final decades of the nineteenth century. As well as confronting a changing international balance of power, Jones describes British Israelism as having the power to overcome the feelings of “ruin and decay.” In this there is perhaps a reference to the movement’s hostility to the rapidly increasing pace of economic/industrial development and with it the promotion of consumerism and secularised leisure pursuits. Jones held fast to a Romantic idealisation of social and economic structures which were being rapidly undermined by the pace of modernity. For example, the liberalisation of Sabbatarian attitudes (and the failure of the Government to intervene to halt this change), which facilitated the operation of the postal service, the railways and the drinks traffic, pushed the working and lower-middle classes to exhaustion and ill-health (which could lead to the degeneration of the race) and compelled them to neglect their religious duties so as to cater to the desires of a wealthier, urban capitalist class, elements of which were deliberately pursuing the Sabbath-breaking agenda in favour of more materialist pursuits. British Israelism lamented the shift in how society determined status from a system which celebrated the traditional, non-tangible, often religiously based virtues (honour, piety, respectability and fidelity) to one in which status was conferred by the weight of ones’ purse. By such arguments British Israelists were setting up a grievance in which a respectable, hard-working and aspirational upper-working class and lower middle-class – the fastest growing economic class of the late nineteenth century and one which had a disproportionately high representation among regular church-goers – allied with an agricultural, military and imperial aristocracy, were portrayed as the victims of a capitalist dominated economy which drove out competition from the smaller producers/suppliers by rigging the system against these classes. British Israelists sought a return to an economic model based on...

*...the closest possible relationship between producers and product and buyer and seller whereby exchange proceeds from community and is immediately both intelligible and personal...they seek a return to those conditions in which economic and moral precepts of inter-personal relations can be sustained and ideas of economic individualism and personal accountability revived.*⁴³

Like the Evangelical reformers at the beginning of the century and at its end, British Israelists “...welcomed any practices that might stay the pace of what was perceived to be a hectic economic growth.”⁴⁴ In a world where many were left behind by the economic and social implications of

⁴² ‘The Lost Tribes of Israel,’ *The Montgomeryshire Echo* (Saturday 9th December, 1893).

⁴³ J. Wilson, British Israelism: A Revitalisation Movement in Contemporary Culture, *Archives de sociologie des religions*: 1968, No. 26, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785-1865* (Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2001), p. 208.

modernity, British Israel offered an alternative vision in which individual economic independence could be reasserted against a growing tide of dependency.

This rejection of dependency at an individual level was extrapolated internationally by Jones in his final point. He asserts that the mutual recognition of a shared divine heritage prevented nations from feeling isolated or threatened. Sympathy and love would reign among kindred peoples based on their being one great and united family. However, in asserting the desire for friendship and co-operation between nations, it can be argued that Jones was attempting to negate the growing loss of Britain's industrial supremacy to powers like America and Germany through a continued rejection of economic competition between nations. In what could be regarded as providing a religious underpinning to the currently emerging idea of Imperial Federation, British Israelism would be the spirit to ensure the continued dominance of Britain by acting as a brake on the development of colonial nationalism on the one hand and of international rivalry on the other.

This helps to explain the movement's rejection of usury and abhorrence of debt. Addressing an Anglo-Israel Association meeting in Leamington Spa in 1880, the Revd. J. Billington⁴⁵ reminded his audience that "Israel was...to be wealthy, should lend unto many nations, but shall borrow of none."⁴⁶ This was underlined more vividly by Hine when he cited the 1875 purchase of shares in the Suez Canal at a meeting of the Colchester branch in 1881:

*Israel was to lend, but never to borrow. They had heard a good deal of nonsense said about a certain Beaconsfield having borrowed £4,000,000 from a certain Rothschild. This particular monetary transaction was merely a stock exchange accommodation – allowing the account to stand over until the next Parliament met; but even if it were a borrowing, then they only borrowed from their own people. There was now something like £787,000,000 owing to this country by virtue of foreign loans, of which there was very little probability of the interest alone being paid back.*⁴⁷

Like the issue of drunkenness, this was another example of the movement trying to explain away apparent contradictions between their own narrative and contemporary reality. For British Israelists, Britain, like its people, was to be economically beholden to no other except God.

Conscientious and principled, yet restless and uncertain, Jones encapsulates many of the characteristics of his age. Full of energy, but plagued by doubt and confusion, this was a time when the historical socio-cultural values system was coming under assault by economic and industrial innovation and by a new generation of artists, philosophers, scientists and theologians. It seemed as though, quite suddenly, the old sharply defined certainties were giving way to modernity's blur. For Jones, and many of his age and background, this changing world before them, a world they had once bestraddled with an impenetrable air of confident surety, now plunged them into a profound trauma. Unable to make peace, or even to compromise, with this new reality, Jones sought some new panacea which would restore the certainties of the past whilst locating the cause of the socio-cultural upheaval in an externalised agent of change. To Jones, and hundreds like him, British Israelism offered that panacea. Arguing that the British people were possessed of a divinely ordained superiority and that all those forces which opposed this will of God were at best ignorant, or at

⁴⁵ Chair of the National Committee of the British-Israel Association from 1880.

⁴⁶ 'The Anglo-Israel Association,' *The Leamington Spa Courier* (8th May, 1880).

⁴⁷ 'The Anglo-Israel Association,' *The Essex Standard* (12th November, 1881).

worst the instrument of evil, was just the kind of consolation that men like Jones so painfully desired. As the son of a man of some literary distinction, but of unsettled religious convictions, Jones probably felt the impact of moral and spiritual disruption more keenly than most; hence his decision to remain within the Nonconformist fold rather than follow his father's example. This reflected the fact that he himself looked to Nonconformity as a bastion against the shallow spiritual relativism that some accused the Established Church of representing. However, when the Nonconformist tradition became similarly influenced by materialist considerations, Jones found the basis of his identity compromised. British Israelism, for him at least, represented the last defence of religious (and socio-cultural) orthodoxy. As Jones wrote in a letter published in the *Mail* newspaper (and was republished in the *Leamington Spa Courier*) in January 1907 in opposition to Campbell's New Theology,

*One of the most disastrous effects of this New Theology is to upset the minds of a multitude of Christians who are unable themselves to settle the difficulties raised...The majority of ministers still believe in...the divine authority of the Bible...Let them also be reassured that no single man can overthrow Christianity, and that there will always be the seven thousand who will not bow the knee to any Baal.*⁴⁸

Jones, and the British Israelists, considered themselves to be among that seven thousand.

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