

# Who and What are the Christian Israelites ?

BY THE AUTHOR OF "BRIGHTER MELBOURNE."

*Extracted from the "Dunolly Express," November, 22, 1892.*

THE question which heads this article is one frequently asked, and one to which numerous and diverse replies have been made. It is the common fortune of all people who advocate and defend principles and opinions not clearly understood, or who adopt manners and customs which to the uninitiated appear strangely eccentric, to be made the subject of misrepresentation, ridicule, and too often scorn. The Society of Christian Israelites have been singularly unfortunate in this respect, and sneers and jeers of the most bitter kind have been levelled at them. Now, I do not think that this opposition has been altogether due to personal hatred, but rather to a want of correct knowledge of the subject, and in part—it must be admitted—to the occasionally indiscreet remarks of some members of the Society itself, who, in their enthusiasm to uphold the tenets, doctrines, and principles of the Christian Israelites, make use of expressions which to unaccustomed eyes and ears seem and sound strange.

In the present article I propose to fairly and squarely reply to the question given above.

Humanly speaking, the founder of the Society of Christian Israelites was a person named John Wroe, who was born in the village of Bowling, parish of Bradford, Yorkshire, on the 19th September, 1782. His was a life of singular hardship, and in his autobiography he tells his story with an artless simplicity, which often approaches to the pathetic. John Wroe appears to have been in some way connected with the people who associated with Joanna Southcott, but this does not appear to be very clear. On page 25 of the first volume of "The Life and Journal of John Wroe," the writer says:—"After I began to have visions, it was made known to me that the people who believed Joanna Southcott to be the woman spoken of in the 12th chapter of Revelations were right." On pages 32-33 John Wroe appears to lay claim to lead the followers of Mrs. Southcott, whom he regards as being partially inspired, but not gifted to clearly make known the whole council of God. When we compare the writings of Joanna Southcott with those of John Wroe, we can see plainly that the latter did improve and add to the work of the former.

There is considerable difficulty in clearly getting at authentic details of the life and work of Mrs. Southcott, because after she left the Wesleyan

Church, and her fame began to be noised abroad, several women in different parts of England passed themselves off as the prophetess, and as in those days there were no telegraphs, telephones, or cheap and rapid postage, these impostors had an extraordinary advantage, and it is the mixing up of their wild assertions with the genuine remarks of Mrs. Southcott herself, that creates so much confusion. Suffice it to say that the Christian Israelites regard Joanna Southcott as the harbinger of the work ultimately completed by John Wroe, and the present organisation may be said to date from Dec. 14, 1822.

One of the most remarkable features of the work of John Wroe is his wonderful knowledge of the whole Bible, and this is all the more remarkable when we recollect that he was an uneducated man. In his "Sermons from the Sacred Scriptures" this is shown in a marked manner. If John Wroe was, as William Chambers says, "a clever impostor," then

I could wish is that the orthodox clergy of our time were equally clever. To my way of thinking (and I make the remark for what it may be worth) the man who discovers new truths in the Bible, whether it may be an eccentric genius like Paracelsus, a distinguished scholar like Emanuel Swedenborg, a poor woolcomber like John Wroe, an enthusiast like John Wesley, a reformer like Alexander Campbell, or a persecuted man like Joseph Smith, is entitled to more honor than he who discovers a gold mine, or unearths a diamond field. We are told that in the multitude of counsellors there is wisdom, and possibly at some period more or less remote we shall find that Truth is not confined to one sect or party, but that it is disseminated amongst all people who name the name of Christ.

John Wroe's interpretations of the Scriptures are decidedly novel, and to some extent different from those of any other theologian. Starting with the assumption that by the sins of Adam mankind inherited a life of blood and an evil heart, which results in the death of the mortal body, he considers that by a life of perfect obedience to all the commands of God, it would be possible to escape the death of the mortal body, in the same way as Enoch and Elijah did. He then goes on to show that man is a threefold being, consisting of body, soul, and spirit, each separate and distinct. The bodies of such as fail to reach the perfection of strict obedience perish entirely, the soul remains in the grave until the resurrection, at which period it is united to the spirit and becomes a spiritual body, and as such lives for ever. According to John Wroe these are the last days of the old world of Satan's Kingdom, which will be destroyed, and the Kingdom of God established in its place, and that now 144,000 of the seed of Israel, selected from amongst both Jews and Christians, will seek and obtain purification of their mortal bodies from the evil which pollutes the blood of all mankind, and that accomplished, they will regain Paradise lost by Adam. He further teaches that all mankind, without exception, will be saved, but that there are degrees of blessings, the highest being attained by those whose bodies by obedience become immortal, and the lowest those who have died unrepentant. This is a brief summary of the most important teaching of John Wroe, and although to those of us who have been educated in what is known as "the orthodox school," they read very strange, they are none the less supported by hosts of Scriptural quotations. The published writings of John Wroe consist of three large volumes, containing nearly altogether nearly 1600 pages, and are entirely different from my body of divinity ever published



before or since his time. The pages abound with prophecies, many of which have been fulfilled in a remarkable manner. John Wroe was several times in Australia. He died in Fitzroy on February 4th, 1863, at the age of 81, and was interred in the Melbourne cemetery. It has not been my good fortune to see John Wroe, but in conversation with those who knew him intimately I am assured that he was a good man, full of the Scriptures, a man who lived a pure life, and one whom to know was to love and admire for his manifold virtues and excellent qualities.

It appears to me that anyone whose aspirations are so high as those of the Christian Israelite must be morally, physically, and religiously good. One of his greatest ambitions is to escape the death of the mortal body, and with this aim before him his whole life must be one of strict purity in actions, in manners, in body, and in every other way; and if by any defect he fails to reach the goal before him, he has at least the satisfaction of knowing that he has lived a well ordered life, and that no stain is attached to his character.

The Christian Israelite obeys both the Law and the Gospel. He is thus, to some extent at least, both a Jew and a Christian. Obeying the Levitical law, he declines to cut either his hair or his beard. The objector remarks, "This is wrong, because Paul said, 'It is a shame for a man to have long hair.'" But it so happens that Paul does not say so. The words of Cor. Ixi, 14, are: "Doth not even Nature itself teach you that if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him."

In a book published by the Christian Israelites called "Commandment of the Law and Testimony" at page 50, this text is compared with Leviticus xxi 5, and is explained by emphasising the word "Nature," which the writer regards as a state of sin, and says that while in a state of sin man feels that long hair is a shame to him, but not so in a state of grace.

Another peculiarity of this body of Christians is their rejection of all pictures, images, and profuse ornamentation. These they regard as savoring of and apt to encourage idolatry. The sanctuary in Fitzroy is therefore a remarkably plain structure, without even windows, all light being gained from skylight. This rejection of pictures, &c., seems to have originated with John Wroe, because Joanna Southcott, shortly before she died, had her portrait painted, and it was afterwards engraved. In this portrait she is represented with a Bible before her opened at Isaiah lxv. and lxvi.

The Christian Israelites in their public worship avoid all prayers save and except the occasional use of the Lord's Prayer. This is in strict accordance with the command of Christ, in Matthew vi. 6. Paul in 1st Timothy ii. 1 2, seems to encourage public prayers, but a close consideration of the text dissipates this idea. Paul's object was to outwardly and publicly show loyalty and obedience to law and all constituted authority. In all petitions to either House of Parliament they must be concluded with the words "And your petitioners, as, in duty bound, will ever *pray*," which is merely an expression of submission to the will and determination of the legislature. There seems to be no authority in the Bible to offer public prayers in a mixed assembly. The magnificent prayer of Solomon at the dedication of the temple, was in reality an invocation, and not a formal prayer in the usual acceptation of the word. As far as I know the Christian Israelites are the only denomination which adopts no public prayers.

The Society observes the Sabbath of both Jews and Christians, and meets for worship on both days. On Friday evening the Sabbath commences at 6 o'clock, and until 12 o'clock it is kept very strictly, one hour being kept with great solemnity. The Christian Sabbath on Sunday is observed as ordinary Christians observe it, worship in private being held in the morning, outdoor service in the afternoon; and again, Divine service is held every Sunday evening in the Sanctuary at 7 o'clock, which is open to the general public. (Our Sunday Service is at 2.00pm)

Last year, on the death of Mr. John Perry, an old and energetic member of the Society of Christian Israelites, the *Collingwood Observer* reprinted nearly the whole of the article about the Society, which appeared in the *Dunolly Express* at the beginning of 1891. This led to an animated controversy, which lasted several weeks, and attracted very considerable attention. It had the effect of giving the Christian Israelites much publicity, and was successful in removing much of the prejudice and misunderstanding which had before existed.

The Christian Israelites appear to be slowly increasing in numbers, but I have been unable to get together complete figures. In the United States of America they appear of late to be particularly active; at least I judge so from the frequent references to the Society which I notice in my latest American papers. There is in America a body of Christians, who call themselves simply "Israelites," but these I imagine are not connected with the Christian Israelites. I assume this, as their wild and incoherent assertions are totally at variance with the calm connected statements of John Wroe. In Victoria the Society has between 200 and 300 adherents. There are congregations in different parts of these colonies, but it would be very difficult to give any idea of the total number of adherents in Australia. Numbers, however, are no test of truth.

The Christian Israelites are a people zealous of good works, active in aiding and assisting every effort conducive to the public welfare, and taking a large and intelligent interest in everything calculated to make men and women better. Freed from bigotry and intolerance, they never countenance nor encourage attacks on other Christians, but disseminating the truth as they have learned it, they try to live honestly and soberly in this world, and as Paul says, "Waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body."

And now a few words in conclusion. To my mind, the more one carefully studies the whole system of faith, doctrine, and practice, which is taught and preached by the Society of Christian Israelites the better, because such a study opens up new avenues of thought, enables one to have a more comprehensive grasp of the Holy Word, and finally encourages him to hope for better things and more glorious triumphs in the coming age, where the abolition of sin introduces the reign of perfect righteousness, and the Kingdom of God and of His Christ shall exist throughout eternity.

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