

How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

The Prevalence and Correlates of Black Hebrew Israelism

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Executive Summary

A series of recent, high-profile controversies have brought renewed attention to Black Hebrew Israelism (BHI), the belief that modern-day American blacks are descended from the ancient Israelites, while—according to some, but not all, Black Hebrew Israelites—modern-day Jews are not. BHI has been associated with both violence and antisemitism. But relatively little is known about its prevalence, or about how predictive BHI views are of antisemitism and support for violence.

This report provides details on the prevalence and correlates of Black Hebrew Israelism, based on an original survey of 1,075 black Americans and 555 nonblack Americans. It finds:

- Roughly 26% of the black population, and 14% of the nonblack population, plausibly profess to believe that modern American blacks are descended from the ancient Israelites, the key belief of Black Hebrew Israelism.
- Roughly 9% of blacks and 3% of nonblacks credibly profess these beliefs and identify as “Hebrew Israelites.”
- Profession of these beliefs and identification as a Hebrew Israelite is associated with warmer feelings toward Jews. But it is also associated with a greater willingness to agree with antisemitic beliefs, such as the claim that Jews have greater loyalty to Israel, that boycotting Jewish businesses over Israel’s actions is justified, and that Jews were involved in the slave trade.
- Profession of BHI beliefs/identification is suggestively associated with greater support for political violence, but it is associated with greater support for interpersonal violence only among nonblack BHI believers.

These findings suggest that Black Hebrew Israelism—at least in some of its more radical manifestations—may be one factor contributing to rising extremism and antisemitism.

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Introduction: The Black Hebrew Israelite Moment

NBA star Kyrie Irving found himself in hot water last year after he shared a documentary on Twitter containing bizarre allegations about Jews. The movie, *Hebrews to Negroes: Wake Up Black America*, claimed that Jews had been responsible for the slave trade and that Jews were in league with Satan.¹ Irving was forced to apologize and was suspended for eight games. Attendees at his first game back were treated to an odd sight. Dozens of black men rallied outside the Barclays Center Arena, chanting “We are the real Jews” and distributing flyers titled “The Truth About Anti-Semitism” and “The Truth About Slavery.”²

Around the same time, rapper Kanye West attracted the spotlight with similar alarming claims. In a series of high-profile interviews and tweets, West attacked Jews for their supposed role in controlling society, while claiming at one point that “I actually can’t be Anti Semitic [*sic*] because black people are actually Jew [*sic*] also.”³ West’s comments were met with adulation among both white nationalists and black devotees of the theory that black people are the “real” Jews.⁴

This idea—that black Americans are the “true” descendants of the 12 tribes depicted in the Old Testament—is more common than some readers might expect. Irving and West are far from the only black celebrities who have expressed their agreement with this view.⁵ These individuals are, wittingly or not, inspired by the same cultural phenomenon: “Black Hebrew Israelism” (BHI).

Black Hebrew Israelism—like other racial theories—can have less than benign impacts. In many cities, organized BHI adherents routinely engage in inflammatory and bigoted street preaching, which often targets not only Jews but homosexuals and white people generally.⁶ BHI ideas have also been linked to violence. Black Hebrew Israelites were responsible for the 2019 Jersey City kosher grocery shooting,⁷ the stabbing of a prominent rabbi in Monsey, NY,⁸ and for the 2021 Waukesha, Wisconsin, Christmas parade attack.⁹ The first two of these incidents were part of a significant increase in antisemitic hate crime, which has not yet abated as of this writing.¹⁰ In May, for example, a Black Hebrew Israelite assaulted four Israeli yeshiva students in Brooklyn, calling them fake Jews and insisting that he was the real Jew.¹¹

Little is known, however, about the exact prevalence of BHI, or about how many of its adherents are given to antisemitism and extremist violence. In 2022, the *Times of Israel* could identify just one survey trying to measure the BHI population: a 2019 LifeWay Research survey of 1,019 American blacks,¹² 4% of whom identified as Black Hebrew Israelites, while a further 19% agreed with “most of the core ideas taught by Black Hebrew Israelites.” But the survey did not specify how it defined those core ideas, and only one question was asked about BHI, leaving many unanswered. How many people, black or otherwise, profess to believe BHI ideas? How many would call themselves Black Hebrew Israelites? And what is the relationship between being in these categories and either antisemitism or support for violence?

This report is an effort to bridge this knowledge gap. It presents results from a survey of 1,075 black Americans and 555 nonblack Americans. Key findings, reviewed herein, include:

- Roughly 26% of the black population, and 14% of the nonblack population, plausibly professes to believe that modern American blacks are descended from the ancient Israelites, the key belief of Black Hebrew Israelism.
- Roughly 9% of blacks and 3% of nonblacks credibly profess these beliefs and identify as “Hebrew Israelites.”
- Profession of these beliefs and identification as a Hebrew Israelite is associated with warmer feelings toward Jews. But it is also associated with a greater willingness to agree with antisemitic beliefs, such as the claim that Jews have greater loyalty to Israel, support for boycotting Jewish businesses over Israel’s actions, and the belief that Jews were involved in the slave trade.
- Profession of BHI beliefs/identification is suggestively associated with greater support for political violence, but it is associated with greater support for interpersonal violence only among nonblack BHI believers.

These results support the view that Black Hebrew Israelite ideas are prevalent in both the population at large and among black people specifically. Furthermore, those who profess such views are more willing to agree with extremist ideas more generally, including support for political violence. While further research is needed, these results give credence to the idea that Black Hebrew Israelism, in its extreme forms, should be considered a radical ideology, one that could potentially give rise to ideologically motivated violence.

These findings on BHI also shed light on one component of the rise in antisemitism—namely, antisemitic tendencies among younger Americans, especially those who are nonwhite.¹³ Recognizing the threat of antisemitism and antisemitic violence requires acknowledging its possibility across the ideological spectrum. This report contributes to that conversation by highlighting an understudied tendency that appears to have a nexus to both antisemitism and violence.

What Is Black Hebrew Israelism?

Black Hebrew Israelism is not a single philosophical or religious tradition. Nor is it a single movement—there are a number of groups espousing BHI ideas, and they sometimes find themselves at odds with one another.

Black Hebrew Israelism, rather, should be understood as an idea: that black people, particularly the descendants of American slaves, are directly descended from the biblical 12 tribes of Israel. “The term ‘Black Israelite’ implies an African American who holds the belief that the ancient Israelites were Black,” Jacob Dorman writes in *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions*. “As Asiel Ben-Israel, a member of the original Hebrew Israelites of Dimona, Israel, put it in 1975: ‘It isn’t a religion, as such, that I follow. It’s the belief that I am a descendant—and that Black people in America are descendants—of the biblical Israelites. We adhere to the law written in the Bible.’”¹⁴

Black Hebrew Israelites are distinct from black Jews, i.e., people who are both black and Jewish, whether by birth or conversion. (Such people make up about 1% of American Jewry.)¹⁵ Some BHIs observe traditional Jewish religious practices, while others incorporate elements of Rastafari and Christianity. Indeed, Dorman suggests that most BHIs “are and always have been believers in the message and messianism of Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ A 2008 Southern Poverty Law Center dispatch

from a BHI worship service in Baltimore describes a syncretic practice: a painting of a black Jesus, separation of men and women (as in an Orthodox Jewish synagogue), use of “Hebrew” names, and readings from the (Protestant) King James Bible.¹⁷

Black Hebrew Israelism traces back at least to the late nineteenth century. Dorman identifies one of its earliest proponents as William Saunders Crowdy, a black preacher who claimed that a revelation had shown him that African Americans were descended from the biblical Israelites.¹⁸ Crowdy subsequently founded the Church of Gods and Saints of Christ. The church spread so far that it eventually “introduced Black Israelite theologies to Africa.”¹⁹ BHI is thus an American-grown phenomenon, not a product of African culture brought over on the Middle Passage.

While all Black Hebrew Israelites, by definition, believe that modern blacks are descended from the Israelites, they differ in whether they hold other, related views. Some Black Hebrew Israelites accept that white Jews are also legitimately Jewish. But others maintain that white Jews are usurpers—variously “Edomites” (descendants of Jacob’s brother, Esau) or the “Synagogue of Satan” referred to in Revelations 3:9.²⁰ Some BHIs also maintain that other nonwhite groups are descendants of the 12 tribes.

How many BHIs believe each of these more extreme views is unclear. The Anti-Defamation League, in its primer on the movement, takes pains to insist that not all BHI are “antisemitic or extremists” but offers no estimate of the proportions of extremist and non-extremist BHIs.²¹

The recent visibility of BHI is reason enough to be interested in its prevalence. But such investigation is especially important for two other reasons.

One is BHI’s historical connection to violence. The Jersey City grocery shooting was one of the deadliest antisemitic crimes in American history, but it was far from unique. BHI in America has been associated with violent activity since at least the 1980s, when members of the Nation of Yahweh, a prominent Miami-based BHI group, “engaged in numerous acts of violence, including several homicides,” at the direction of the group’s leader. Seventeen members of the group were eventually indicted on federal RICO charges.²²

The second reason is BHI’s connection to antisemitism—specifically, antisemitic violence. Antisemitic hate crimes have risen significantly in recent years.²³ Although these crimes are committed by offenders from a variety of demographic backgrounds, blacks account for a larger-than-population-share of offenders,²⁴ and a significant share of offenders in jurisdictions with many Jewish people.²⁵ If Black Hebrew Israelism is common within the black population and correlated with antisemitism and violence, it may play some role in the combination of the two.

Unfortunately, many of the entities that monitor ideologically motivated extremism and violence have grown increasingly wary of appearing too critical of radical ideologies that originate among black people. The Southern Poverty Law Center, for example, used to track nearly 150 black “separatist” hate groups because of their “antiwhite” and antisemitic beliefs.²⁶ But in October 2020, the center announced that it would get rid of its “black separatist” listing, identifying these groups primarily as antisemitic.²⁷ As of 2022, the only majority nonwhite antisemitic hate group that SPLC tracked was the Nation of Islam.²⁸

SPLC’s decision came on the heels of reports that the Department of Justice had, under President Donald Trump, been investigating “black identity extremism”—a category that, according to critics, would sweep up nonviolent black activists.²⁹ The ensuing backlash against the “black identity extremism” categorization, however, led groups like SPLC to downplay the increase in violent black nationalism and violent antipolice sentiment—an increase that had originally been identified by SPLC.³⁰ In other words, since the “racial reckoning” of 2020, many of those groups normally concerned about extremist violence have been quick to deny that violence is a concern when the perpetrator is black. That may also mean that they do not give enough attention to Black Hebrew Israelism, particularly relative to its influence.

But how influential is Black Hebrew Israelism? To answer this and other questions, the following sections detail the results of the survey that is the major focus of this report.

Obtaining (and Weighting) the Survey

To investigate the extent and correlates of BHI ideology, a survey was fielded on the Qualtrics platform between July 11 and July 14, 2023, collecting a total of 1,630 responses. In that period, responses from 1,075 self-identified “Black or African American” respondents (hereinafter, just “black”) were collected. For comparison purposes, responses from 555 nonblack respondents were collected. These included 86 self-identified “American Indian or Alaska Native,” 44 “Asian or Pacific Islander,” 157 “white,” and 268 “other.” Respondents were also asked if they were of “Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.” A total of 71% of the “Other” respondents identified as Hispanic, versus 14% of the rest of the sample, explaining the high rates of “other” identification in the survey.

Table 1

Measure	Black		Nonblack	
	Sample	2021 ACS	Sample	2021 ACS
Share Male	0.253	0.471	0.283	0.493
Share Hispanic	0.113	0.018	0.463	0.189
<i>Race</i>	-	-	-	-
White	-	-	0.283	0.823
Asian American Pacific Islander	-	-	0.079	0.079
American Indian / Alaskan Native	-	-	0.155	0.012
Other	-	-	0.483	0.086
<i>Education</i>	-	-	-	-
< H.S.	0.042	0.121	0.0505	0.105
H.S.	0.341	0.322	0.306	0.266
Some college	0.258	0.248	0.259	0.206
2-year degree	0.113	0.083	0.103	0.084
4-year degree	0.14	0.141	0.178	0.21
Master’s/professional degree	0.095	0.077	0.0811	0.113
Doctorate	0.012	0.008	0.0216	0.015
<i>Age</i>	-	-	-	-
18–27	0.474	0.194	0.365	0.164
28–37	0.211	0.197	0.227	0.173
38–47	0.155	0.168	0.195	0.162
48–57	0.077	0.162	0.106	0.16
58–67	0.051	0.151	0.072	0.163
68–77	0.025	0.087	0.03	0.114
78–87	0.004	0.033	0.0056	0.05
88–97	0.001	0.009	0	0.014
97+	0	0	0	0

Table 1 provides details on the demographic characteristics of the black and nonblack samples, compared with the same characteristics in the full population from the 2021 American Community Survey, obtained from IPUMS.³¹ Both samples differ from the target population on several key dimensions. Both samples are about 25% male, compared with about 50% in the general population; they are also substantially younger and more Hispanic, on average. The nonblack sample is far less white, and far more Native American, than the general population.

To account for these discrepancies, weights were constructed using the raking procedure.³² These weights adjust for sex, Hispanic identity, educational attainment, and 10-year age group. The weights for the nonblack group also adjust for racial identity. A total of 51 respondents—26 in the black sample and 25 in the nonblack sample—listed their sex as either “other” or “prefer not to say.” Given the large sex skew in the survey, I omit these respondents for purposes of weight calculations and therefore in all subsequent estimates.

Estimating the Black Hebrew Israelite Population

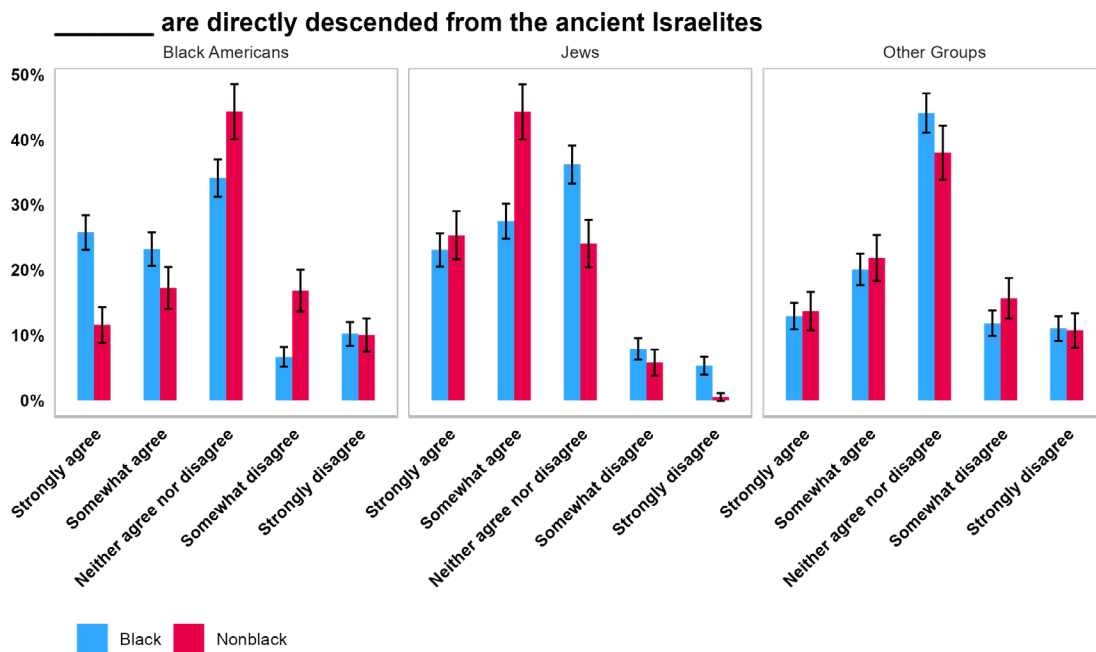
What makes someone a Black Hebrew Israelite? The question is more complicated than it might seem. In order to be a BHI, does someone need to identify as a BHI, or just hold BHI beliefs? If so, which BHI beliefs? If someone professes to believe that black people and contemporary Jews are descended from the ancient Israelites, is he a BHI? Or must he also believe that Jews are not descended from the Israelites? Furthermore, is race a necessary component of BHI identification? Does a white person who believes that black people are descended from the ancient Israelites count as a BHI?

To begin answering these questions, the survey collected data that provide insight into each of these dimensions. Respondents first read a paragraph about the “ancient Israelites,” described as the historical people whose story is related in the Old Testament (see the Appendix for full wording), and they were asked how familiar they were with the story. Then they were questioned on whether they agreed with three statements:

- Modern black Americans are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.
- Modern-day Jews are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.
- Many nonwhite groups in the United States, including, for example, Latin American or Native American people, are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.

Figure 1

Beliefs on Descent from Ancient Israelites



The composition of the responses to these questions is depicted in **Figure 1**, including 95% confidence intervals. In general, black respondents were much more likely than nonblack respondents to report believing that black Americans are directly descended from the ancient Israelites, and also somewhat more likely to say that modern Jews are not descended from the ancient Israelites. More specifically, 49% of black respondents (versus 28.9% of nonblack respondents) somewhat or strongly agree with the claim that black Americans are descended from the Israelites, and 13.2% of black respondents (versus 6.3%) somewhat or strongly disagree with the claim that Jews are descended from the Israelites.

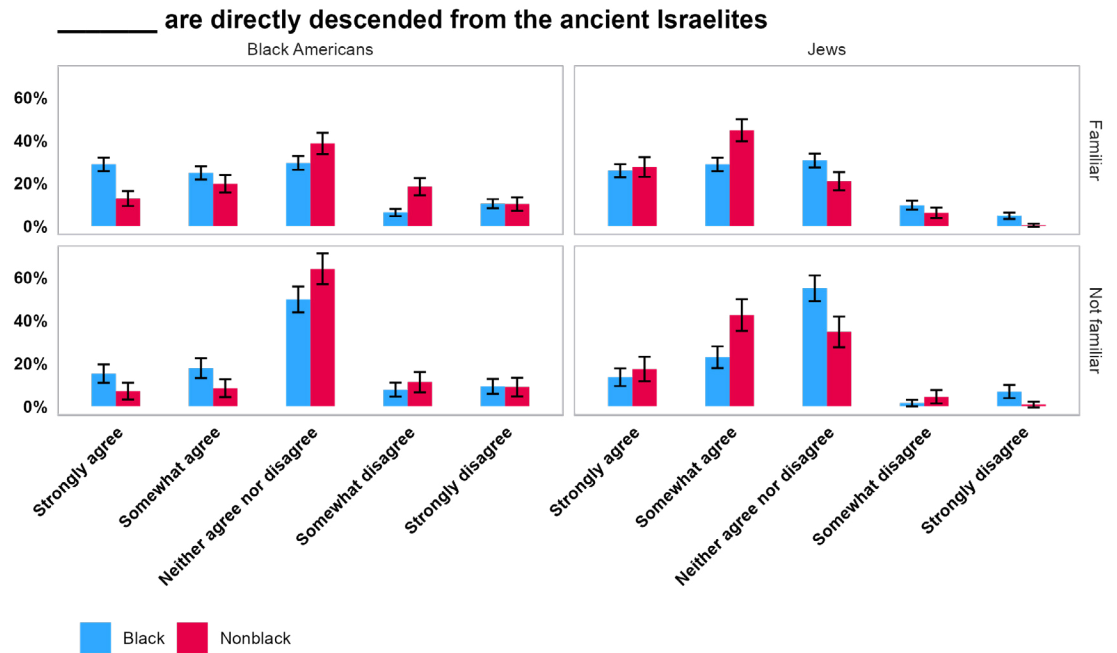
These figures provide an initial estimate of how many people—black and nonblack—profess the key BHI belief (that modern black Americans are descended from the biblical Israelites). As expected, that belief is more common among black respondents. Both groups, however, are more likely to say that black Americans are descended from the Israelites than they are to say that Jews are *not* descended from the Israelites. This shows that it is possible to profess one view without the other—and thus that there are “moderate” and “radical” variations on Black Hebrew Israelism.

It is worth noting that the two samples do not differ in how likely they are to believe that other, nonwhite groups are descended from the ancient Israelites. It is possible that this captures some general tendency to attribute descent from the ancient Israelites to other groups. Alternatively, respondents may not hold strong opinions on this question; they may be agreeing as a matter of acquiescence bias. The similarity in responses to this question (whether other groups are descended from the ancient Israelites) suggests that any intergroup difference on the other two questions (descent of blacks and modern-day Jews) likely reflects different underlying beliefs, as opposed to a tendency common to both samples.



Figure 2

Familiarity with Story of the Ancient Israelites



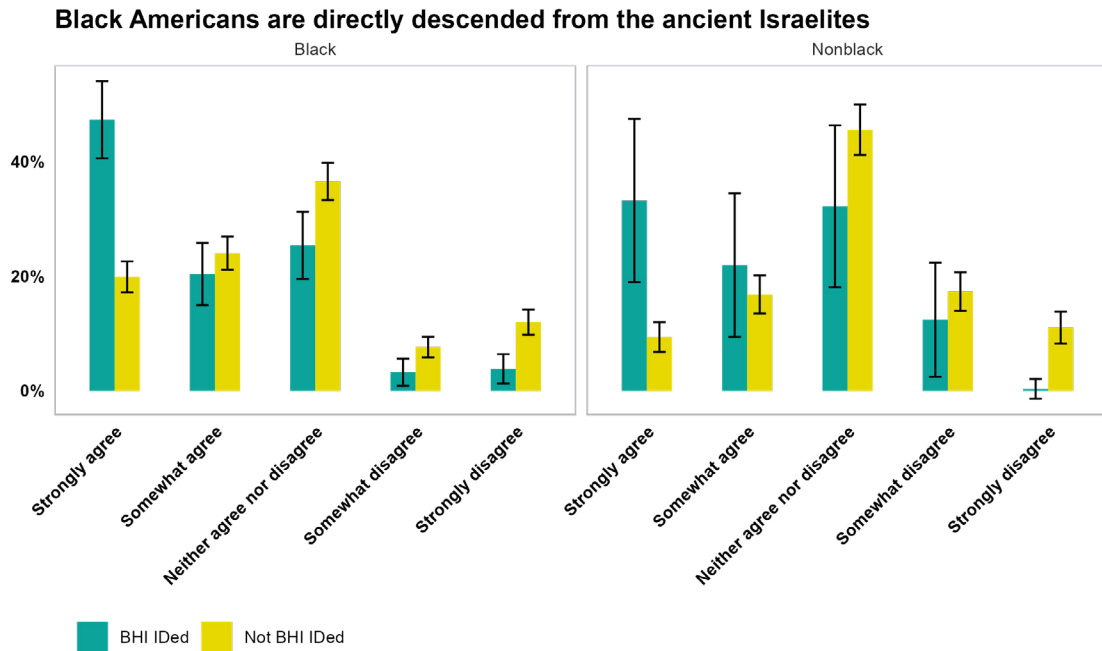
One issue with these estimates is that 22% of both samples report being unfamiliar, to some degree, with the story of the ancient Israelites. Among those who said that they lacked familiarity, 33% of the black sample and 15.6% of the nonblack sample nonetheless said that they believed that black Americans were descended from the ancient Israelites.

As **Figure 2** shows, unfamiliar respondents disproportionately “neither agree nor disagree” with the idea that black Americans are descended from the ancient Israelites. Respondents who are at least “moderately” familiar with the story of the ancient Israelites are, in at least some configurations, more, rather than less, willing to say that black Americans are descended from the Israelites. Still, level of knowledge is an important factor in weighing whether a respondent should be classified as BHI.

In addition to being asked about BHI beliefs, respondents were directly asked about BHI identification (specifically: “Would you describe yourself as a ‘Black Hebrew Israelite’ or ‘Hebrew Israelite?’”). Among the black sample, 21.5% said yes (95% CI: 19%–24%); among the nonblack sample, 9.3% said yes (95% CI: 6.8%–11.7%).

Figure 3

Beliefs on Descent from Ancient Israelites by Black Hebrew Israelite Identification



Notably, while identifying as a Hebrew Israelite is associated with believing that black Americans are descended from the ancient Israelites, it is not perfectly so. As **Figure 3** shows, 67.7% of black self-IDed BHIs strongly or somewhat agree with that claim, but another 7% disagree, and the remaining 25.3% neither agree nor disagree. Are these individuals properly characterized as Black Hebrew Israelites?

Furthermore, 9.3% of the nonblack sample identified themselves as (Black) Hebrew Israelites. About 1 percentage point of that is attributable to respondents who said that they were Jewish, and so could plausibly identify as a “Hebrew Israelite” without any ideological baggage. A total of 79.1% of the group identified as white; they were not overly identified with any political party or ideology. (The large error bars emphasize the imprecision of this estimate, which is based on a very small sample.)

Rather than relying on BHI belief or BHI self-identification alone, I constructed two categories from these data: “BHI believer” and “self-identified BHI.” BHI believers are those respondents who: a) claim to be moderately, very, or extremely familiar with the story of the ancient Israelites; and b) somewhat or strongly agree that black Americans are descended from the ancient Israelites. “Self-identified BHI” are those who meet these conditions *and* self-identify as Hebrew Israelite or Black Hebrew Israelite.

Table 2

	Black	Nonblack
BHI Believer	25.9% (23.2%–28.5%)	14.2% (11.3%–17.2%)
Self-IDed BHI	8.9% (10.7%–7.2%)	3.2% (1.7%–4.7%)

Estimated proportions for each group and 95% confidence intervals are reported in **Table 2**. It suggests—about in line with the LifeWay survey—that roughly a quarter of black respondents believe credibly in the core tenet of Black Hebrew Israelism, and about 9% do so and identify as BHIs.

While it may be surprising that 14.2% of nonblack respondents are classified as BHI believers, there is no reason that nonblack people cannot believe that contemporary black Americans are descended from the ancient Israelites.

But it is slightly harder, on a theoretical level, to explain the nonblack respondents who plausibly self-ID as BHI. First, it is important to note that this group is extremely small in absolute terms—only 13 respondents, which cautions against strongly generalizing from their responses. Additionally, these individuals may represent false positives: either through acquiescence bias (they were asked if they IDed in a yes or no question at the end of a survey about Black Hebrew Israelism), measurement bias (they misread the question), or through deliberately misleading responses (“trolling”). If this group of respondents indeed represents an error of some type, the nonblack rate might be taken as a measure of the false-positive rate on these questions generally, implying that the true population incidence in the black population is the black values less the nonblack values.

Because it is impossible to evaluate the sincerity of the nonblack BHI-identifiers, subsequent questions continue to report on their responses. In interpreting such figures, readers should keep in mind the imprecision of these estimates and the possibility that they represent false positives of some kind.

Black Hebrew Israelism and Antisemitism

What is the relationship between Black Hebrew Israelism (as identified above) and antisemitism? To address this question, respondents were administered two different measures.

One was a set of “feelings thermometers,” which ask respondents to rate how “warm” or “cool” they feel toward a topic or group on a scale from 0 to 100. Respondents were asked about their feelings on “African Americans,” “whites,” “Hispanics,” “Asians,” “Christians,” “Jews,” “Muslims,” and “Black Hebrew Israelites.”

As a second measure of antisemitism, respondents were asked about their agreement or disagreement with a series of statements about Jews. Three of these statements were drawn from prior survey research on antisemitism by Eitan Hersh and Laura Royden.³³ These were:

- “Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America.”
- “It is appropriate for opponents of Israel’s policies and actions to boycott Jewish-American-owned businesses in their communities.”
- “Jews in the United States have too much power.”



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

In addition, respondents were administered three questions based on specific antisemitic beliefs commonly attributed to Black Hebrew Israelites. These were:

- “Relative to other white people, Jews were significantly more involved in and profited more from the transatlantic slave trade.”
- “Jews are descended from Esau, the brother of the biblical Jacob, rather than from Jacob, as is commonly claimed.”
- “Jews are descended from Satan.”

Table 3

Prompt	Feelings Thermometer for Jews							
	Black				Nonblack			
	β	se	p	N	β	se	p	N
Jews more loyal	0.019	2.048	0.993	806	1.616	2.735	0.555	417
Boycott Jewish businesses	-3.717	2.276	0.103	847	-2.933	3.428	0.393	436
Jews too much power	-10.56	2.075	<0.01	869	-7.871	3.872	0.043	457
Jews involved in slave trade	-9.378	2.159	<0.01	793	-9.788	2.771	<0.01	374
Jews descended from Esau	3.714	2.225	0.096	776	-2.332	3.102	0.453	377
Jews descended from Satan	-8.032	3.173	0.012	886	-4.197	4.428	0.344	463

An important methodological question is how associated these two measures are. In particular, how correlated are the statements that measure antisemitism with the feelings thermometer? **Table 3** reports the association between respondents’ feelings toward Jews and their agreement with particular antisemitic statements.³⁴ Each β coefficient represents the effect of agreement with each statement on the feelings-thermometer score toward Jews. For example, black respondents who agree that Jews were involved in the slave trade were 9.4 points cooler toward Jews, on average, while nonblack respondents who agreed with that statement were 9.8 points cooler.

Interestingly, the measures of antisemitism are not universally associated with the feelings thermometer, nor are they associated in the same way across the two samples. In the black sample, three of the measures (“Jews have too much power,” “Jews were more involved in the slave trade,” and “Jews are descended from Satan”) are significantly and negatively associated. Another (“boycott Jewish businesses to criticize Israel”) is marginally significantly ($p = 0.103$) and negatively associated. Finally, one (“Jews are descended from Esau”) is marginally significantly ($p = 0.096$) and positively associated. In the nonblack sample, only two of the statements (“Jews have too much power” and “Jews were more involved in the slave trade”) are significantly ($p < 0.05$) and negatively associated, such that cooler feelings are associated with a higher probability of reporting belief.

It is not clear why these two measures are not perfectly correlated. Respondents may not interpret all the beliefs questions as negatively valenced. Additionally, some respondents may not have recognized Esau as a biblical figure, and thus their responses to that question do not represent their views on Jews as a whole. It is harder to explain why the view that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America is not significantly correlated in both samples. However, some respondents may have viewed this as a neutral judgment (e.g., about Jews internationally, as opposed to American Jews specifically).

At the same time, the two questions may be measuring different things. Feelings thermometers, as one conference paper puts it, “may be plagued by problems of interpersonal incomparability—that is, different people may interpret the scale in different ways, thereby prohibiting the comparison of scores across individuals.”³⁵ One person’s 50 on a feelings thermometer, in other words, may be another’s 25. At the same time, the antisemitism questions may or may not measure perfectly

capture actual antisemitism—a criticism that has been leveled against, for example, the commonly used racial resentment scale. As a consequence of this uncertainty, the remainder of this section reports results for each measure separately.

Table 4

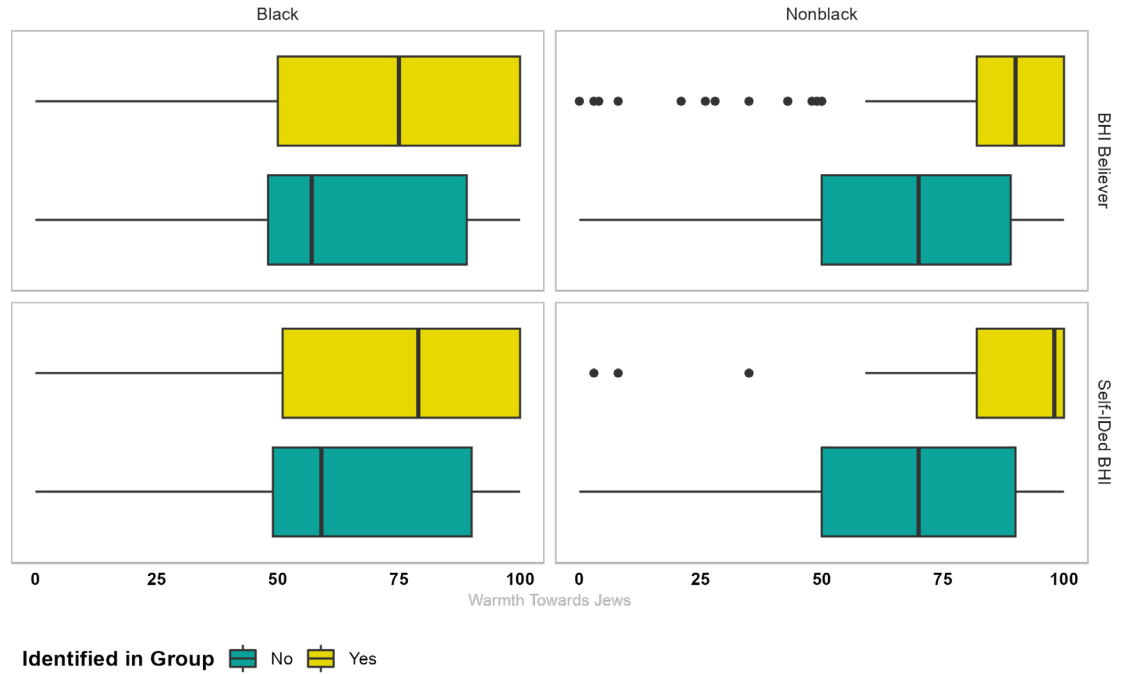
Black						
Group	BHI believer			Self-IDed BHI		
	β	se	p	β	se	p
African Americans	4.51	1.59	<0.01	5.50	2.47	0.027
Whites	1.00	2.13	0.639	5.03	3.33	0.132
Hispanics	2.68	1.88	0.154	7.86	2.90	<0.01
Asians	5.57	1.98	<0.01	5.00	3.04	0.101
Christians	2.95	1.93	0.127	2.51	2.95	0.397
Jews	5.97	2.02	<0.01	7.98	3.1	0.011
Muslims	4.73	1.96	0.016	12.06	3.03	<0.01
BHIs	5.76	1.99	<0.01	12.51	3.07	<0.01
Nonblack						
Group	BHI believer			Self-IDed BHI		
	β	se	p	β	se	p
African Americans	6.41	3.23	0.048	-16.39	6.39	0.011
Whites	17.12	3.37	<0.01	4.62	6.84	0.5
Hispanics	1.10	3.40	0.747	-33.79	6.57	<0.01
Asians	0.77	3.25	0.813	-7.93	6.43	0.218
Christians	13.63	3.09	<0.01	5.11	6.17	0.408
Jews	15.80	3.28	<0.01	12.97	6.62	0.051
Muslims	5.37	3.51	0.127	-7.05	6.95	0.311
BHIs	15.42	3.51	<0.01	-1.9	7.08	0.789

Table 4 reports linear regression estimates of both BHI belief and BHI identification on warmth scores across all measured groups. Contrary to the hypothesis that Black Hebrew Israelism is associated with antisemitism, BHI respondents are significantly more likely, across both samples and measures, to be warmer toward Jews, not cooler. In part, this reflects some underlying general tendency toward warmth among those identified as BHI. This is apparent from the positive coefficients in all responses in three of the four groups (save for among the nonblack self-IDed BHI). Accounting for this by mean-centering each respondent’s feelings thermometers makes black BHI believers’ coefficient for Jews positive but nonsignificant, and those for black self-IDed BHI negative and nonsignificant. Nonblack respondents retain the same direction and significance. In other words, even after accounting for higher warmth overall, BHIs are at least no less warm toward Jews than non-BHIs.



Figure 4

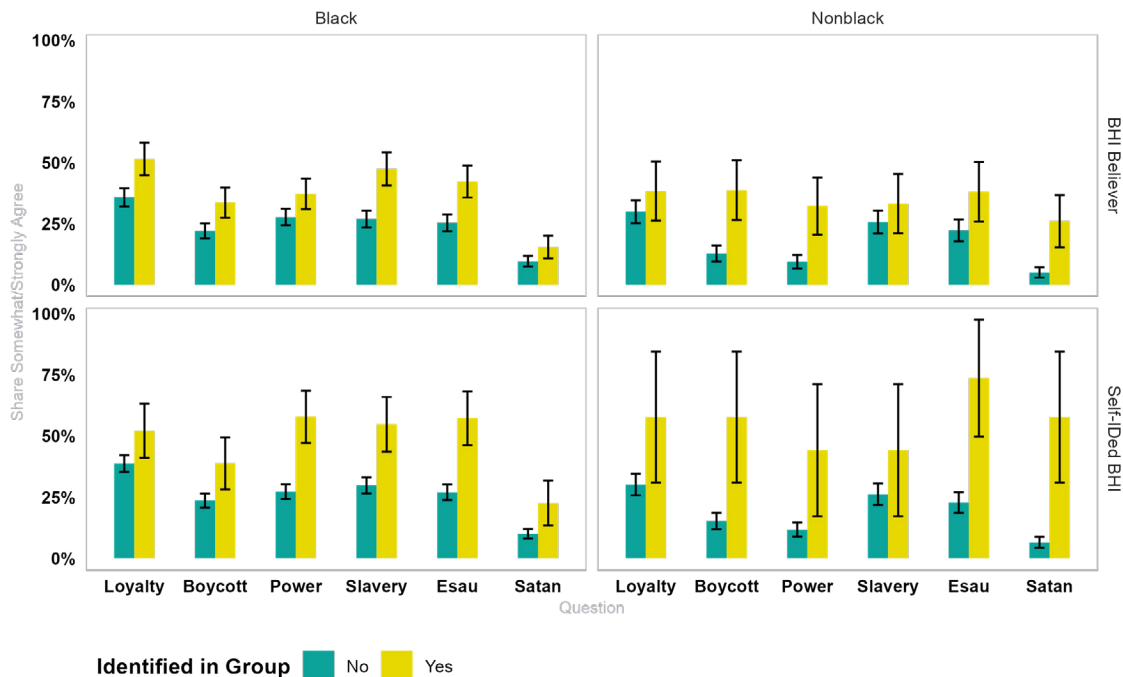
Distribution of Feelings Thermometer Toward Jews, by Sample and BHI Measure



This outcome also cannot be explained by outliers biasing the overall estimate. **Figure 4** shows box plots of the (weighted) responses for both samples and measures. Those identified in each group generally are not only much warmer, on average, but are warmer at the 25th and 75th percentiles, too. Indeed, the negative effect of nonwhite self-IDed BHIs on warmth is driven by a few outliers.

Figure 5

Agreement with Antisemitic Beliefs, by Sample and BHI Measure

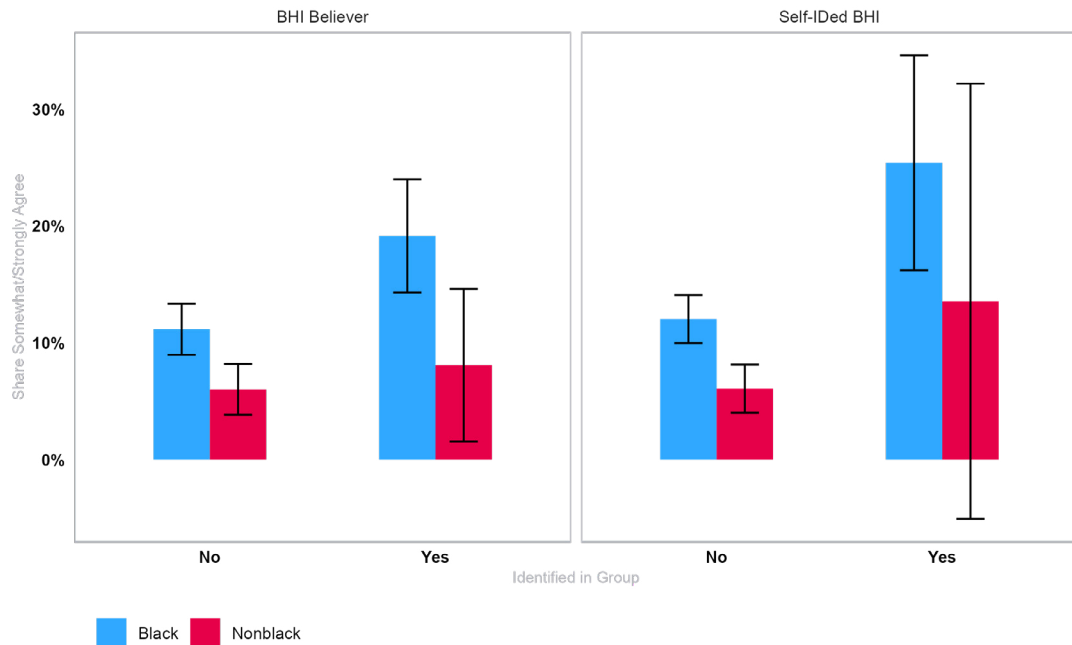


What about the antisemitic belief questions? Rates of agreement with all six statements for BHI believers/identifiers are depicted in Figure 5. In general, across both samples, both BHI groups are significantly more likely to somewhat or strongly agree with the various antisemitic statements. The results on the two beliefs sometimes associated particularly with BHI thought—that Jews are descended from Satan, or that Jews are descended from Isaac’s brother, Esau—are independently notable. Only minorities of “BHI believers” assented to these views. A majority of nonblack respondents who IDed as BHI (a very small group) said yes to both, but black self-IDed BHI were much more likely to say that they believe that Jews were descended from Esau than from Satan.

Another way to gauge antisemitism is to count the number of statements that respondents agree with. In the black sample, respondents agreed with 1.38 statements, on average; in the nonblack sample, the figure was 0.97. In the black sample, being a BHI believer was associated with an additional 0.82 agreements, and being self-IDed BHI was associated with an additional 1.45 agreements. In the nonblack sample, being a BHI believer was associated with an additional 1.06 agreements, and being a self-IDed BHI was associated with an additional 2.40 agreements. (All figures were statistically significant.) In short, both BHI belief and self-identification are significantly associated with an increased probability of agreeing with a variety of antisemitic views, from the idea that Jews have too much power to the idea that Jews are the offspring of Satan.

Figure 6

Belief that Jews Are Not Descended from the Israelites, by Sample and BHI Measure



One antisemitic belief that is not included in the analyses above—but is measured by the survey and briefly examined in the last section—is the idea that Jews are not descended from the ancient Israelites in general. As **Figure 6** shows, this idea is more common among BHI believers and self-IDed BHIs. A total of 19% of black BHI believers and 25% of black self-IDed BHIs somewhat or strongly believe that Jews are not descended from the Israelites. The equivalent (very imprecise) figures for the nonblack samples are 8.1% and 13.6%.

In short, BHI believers and self-IDed BHIs both report warmer feelings toward Jews, but they also are more likely to agree with antisemitic statements and less likely to say that Jews are descended from the Israelites. There are a few explanations for this apparent disparity.

One is measurement issues. As previously noted, feelings-thermometer responses may differ greatly from respondent to respondent, and thus have limited interpersonal comparability. However, this concern is somewhat belied by the general overall increased warmth depicted in Figure 4—if the issue is comparability, it is comparability in a way that is correlated with the categorization. Another source of measurement error could be confusion among respondents about the meaning of “Jews” across multiple questions—a particular concern among respondents who believe *themselves* to be Jewish even when they would not be considered Jews by most other Americans.

It is also possible that agreement with antisemitic beliefs does not necessarily measure explicit enmity toward Jews. Respondents may agree that Jews were involved in the slave trade or that Jews have too much power, without necessarily feeling (or at least expressing) intrinsic negative affect toward Jews. A corollary of this explanation is that some respondents may simply be more inclined to agree with statements of radical or extreme views of all kinds—both antisemitic beliefs and BHI beliefs themselves—while simultaneously being more warm in their expressed feelings toward other groups.

Black Hebrew Israelism and Violence

Black Hebrew Israelism is sometimes associated, in the popular imagination and in fact, with violence. But to what extent does belief in Black Hebrew Israelism actually predict stated support for violence? And what kind of violence? To answer these questions, respondents were asked two batteries of questions about their support for violence. One, meant to measure support for personal violence, is drawn from the General Social Survey. It asks respondents: “What do you think about an adult man punching an adult male stranger in the following situations?” The situations are:

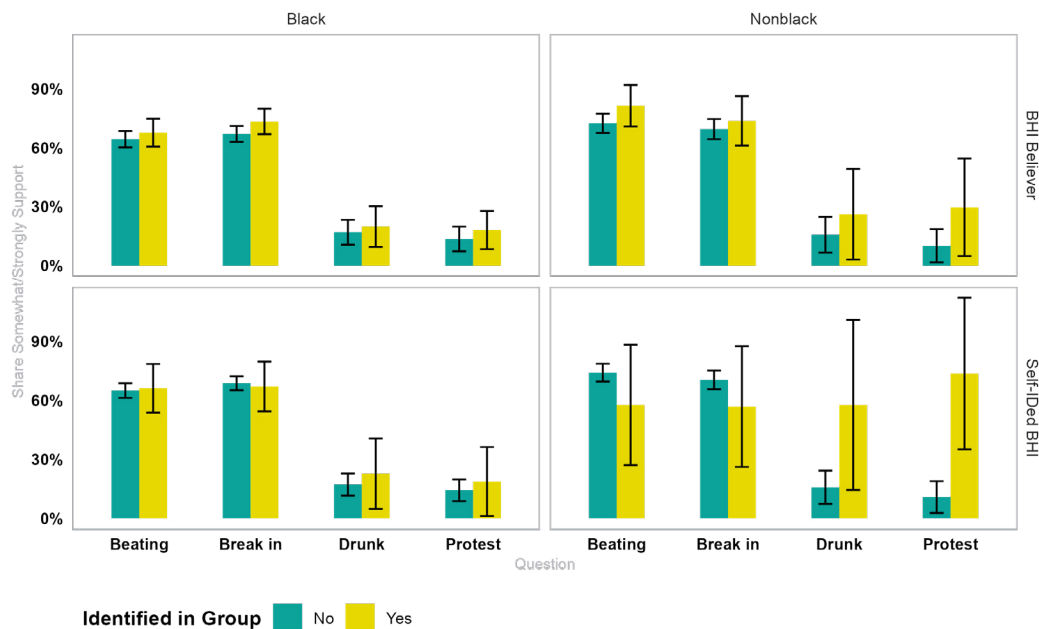
- If the stranger was in a protest march showing opposition to the man’s views?
- If the stranger was drunk and bumped into the man and his wife on the street?
- If the stranger was beating up a woman and the man saw it?
- If the stranger had broken into the other man’s house?

The second battery, meant to measure support for political violence, is drawn from a widely cited survey conducted by Wintemute et al. It asks respondents: “What do you think about the use of force or violence in the following situations?”³⁶ The situations are:

- To advance an important political objective that you support.
- To oppose the government when it does not share your beliefs.
- To prevent discrimination based on race or ethnicity.

Figure 7

Support for Interpersonal Violence, by Sample and BHI Measure



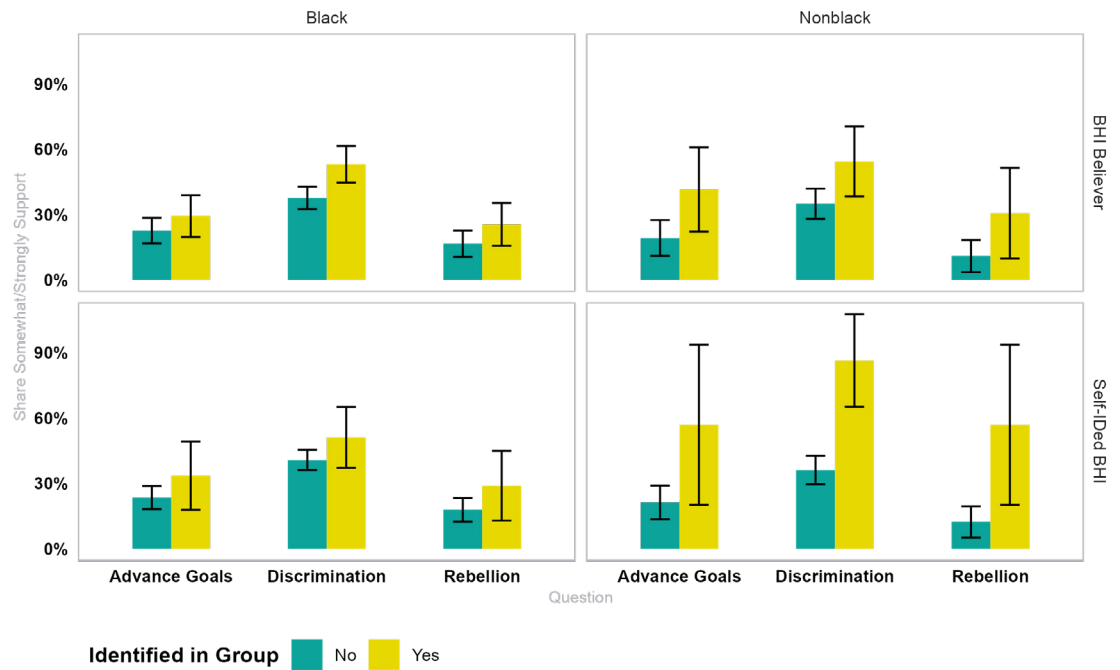
As **Figure 7** shows, black BHI believers and black self-IDed BHIs are not meaningfully more likely to support interpersonal violence than their non-BHI peers. Another approach is to collapse the four questions into a single scale, adding one “point” for each affirmative (“strongly support” or “somewhat support”) response to the interpersonal violence questions. In a regression analysis, being a BHI believer increases the average score on this scale by just 0.17 points ($p = 0.024$) on a four-point scale; being a self-IDed BHI increases the score by 0.09 points ($p = 0.417$). Similarly small is the effect of being in either BHI category on answering yes to both the more “extreme” questions (support for hitting a protester or a drunk person who bumped into the man on the street).

Respondents in both nonblack BHI groups are significantly more likely to support interpersonal violence across all the measures (except for using violence in the case of intervening in a beating or stopping a break-in). Indeed, the extremely high rates of support for violence in the nonblack self-IDed BHI group—which deviates from the pattern of little or no effect in the other three groupings—provides further evidence that these respondents are particularly unusual or misleading.

In short, Black Hebrew Israelism does not appear to be meaningfully associated with support for interpersonal violence in the black sample, while it is associated with support for interpersonal violence in the nonblack sample (though the latter may be representative of strangeness among nonblack BHIs).

Figure 8

Support for Political Violence, by Sample and BHI Measure



On the other hand, Black Hebrew Israelism is associated with relative support for political violence in both samples, albeit with large enough confidence intervals that this result may be attributable to statistical chance. As **Figure 8** shows, across both samples, both BHI identification and BHI belief are associated with increased assent to all three questions in the political-violence battery. They are also associated in regression analysis when responses to the three questions are converted to a three-point scale. In the black sample, being a BHI believer increases the number of affirmative answers by 0.30 ($p < 0.01$), while being self-IDed BHI increases it by 0.32 ($p < 0.01$). In the nonblack sample, the equivalent figures are 0.61 ($p < 0.01$) and 1.31 ($p < 0.01$).

Survey-based measures of support for violence are controversial and may overstate the surveyed population’s actual level of support.³⁷ But even with that caveat, the results above seem to suggest that identifying with or professing the beliefs of Black Hebrew Israelism is associated with support for political violence but not always interpersonal violence. As the next and final section discusses, this is consonant with understanding BHI as a manifestation of an underlying tendency to extremism generally.

Conclusion: BHI and Extreme Beliefs

The survey reviewed in this report provides insight into both the extent and correlates of Black Hebrew Israelite ideology. It finds that roughly 25% of black adults and roughly 14% of nonblack adults claim familiarity with the story of the ancient Israelites and agree with the claim that modern black Americans are descended from them—the key belief of Black Hebrew Israelism. It finds that a further 9% of black adults, and 3% of nonblack adults, profess these views and self-identify as Hebrew Israelites, black or otherwise. These estimates are similar to, but slightly higher than, those found in the single-question 2019 LifeWay survey (4% of black adults consider themselves Black Hebrew Israelites; 19% agree with the “core ideas” of BHI).³⁸

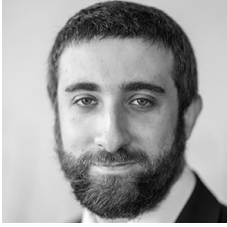
These figures suggest that Black Hebrew Israelism is a relatively prevalent idea. By way of comparison, a 2021 Pew survey found that 66% of black adults identified as Protestant, 6% as Catholic, 3% as “other Christian,” 3% as “non-Christian faiths,” and 21% as unaffiliated.³⁹ The results of the survey would suggest that there are more self-identified Black Hebrew Israelites than there are black Catholics or black believers in non-Christian faiths. Black Hebrew Israelism’s nature—an idea, not a religion—means that some of those self-identified with other religious groups probably also profess its core ideas.

The survey also reveals that the correlates of Black Hebrew Israelism paint a complicated picture. Professing BHI ideas or self-identifying as a Black Hebrew Israelite predicts greater probability of agreeing with antisemitic ideas but also greater warmth toward Jews. Similarly, being in one of those categories predicts greater support for political violence but not (among black respondents) interpersonal violence. This lack of consistency may reflect measurement issues, but it may also represent an underlying tendency toward embrace of radical or extreme ideas more generally. That is, respondents who are willing to say that they believe in a contrarian view—that black Americans are descended from the biblical Israelites—may also be willing to agree with other contrarian statements, such as that Jews are descended from Satan or that revolutionary violence is sometimes justified.

A tendency toward extremism has been widely attested in the social psychology literature. Surveys consistently find, for example, that sizable fractions of Americans profess belief in a wide variety of conspiracy theories.⁴⁰ Indeed, the battery of political-violence questions used here is drawn from a survey that found that similarly large proportions are willing to support such violence, at least some of the time.⁴¹ Exposure to and agreement with extremist ideas are often characterized as risk factors for violence, including terrorism. Antisemitic views are specifically associated with “a conspiracist view of the world, a desire to overturn the social order, and a preference for authoritarian forms of government” in two surveys of the U.K. population.⁴²

To be sure, the idea that contemporary black Americans are descended from the biblical ancient Israelites is not itself inherently dangerous, even if it is false. This survey seems to corroborate the view, suggested in prior research, that the BHI community is composed of a benign majority and a smaller, more radical minority—consisting of those who hold other antisemitic views, support political violence, and believe not only that black people are Jewish but also that Jewish people are secretly not. These types of radical ideas, which could be antecedent to violence, are not held by the majority of Black Hebrew Israelites, but they are common enough that they should be taken as seriously as other radicalizing ideologies (white supremacy, radical Islam, anarchism, etc.) and given appropriate policy attention.

Further research on BHI is merited. Ambiguities in survey response—especially in the antisemitism questions—may be resolvable with better designed questions. (Use of another antisemitism battery might be informative.)⁴³ And the risk of acquiescence bias was not fully addressed, which may have led to inflated estimates of BHI’s prevalence.⁴⁴ In addition to addressing these concerns, further quantitative and qualitative work on BHI could better characterize the extent, nature, and risks associated with these beliefs. No matter which racial groups espouse them or where they fall on the ideological spectrum, extremist ideologies that could encourage violence—like the most extreme manifestations of BHI—warrant closer attention.



About the Author

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Appendix: Full Survey Wording

The following text replicates the survey as presented to survey takers. Variable names are used in the data available in the project Github, and so reflect the question to which participants were responding.

[Block 1]

Thank you for taking the time to complete this brief survey. Because this survey is meant to measure the views of different demographic groups, before we begin we'll need to ask you about some identifying information.

[QScreen1]

What is your race?

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian or Pacific Islander
- Other

[QScreen2]

Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

- Yes
- No

[BLOCK 2]

Thank you! We can now proceed with the survey.

Please read the following details closely:

The “Israelites” are the people whose story is told in the first books of the Bible, what is commonly called the Old Testament. According to that story, the Israelites were the descendants of the patriarch Jacob, whose family left Canaan and entered Egypt, where they were eventually enslaved by the ruling pharaoh. They were subsequently freed by the biblical God, then returned to Canaan, the “promised land,” and established their own state there. While the truth of parts of this story is contested, modern archaeology generally agrees that a group called the Israelites controlled the area of Canaan—now the area controlled by the State of Israel—as early as 900 B.C.E., and the biblical story originates from this culture.



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[QBHI0]

This question partially serves as an attention check. Incorrect answers result in the end of the survey.

In which book is the story of the ancient Israelites told?

- The Old Testament
- Oliver Twist
- The Cat in the Hat
- Macbeth

[QBHI1]

How familiar would you say you are with the story of the ancient Israelites?

- Not familiar at all
- Slightly familiar
- Moderately familiar
- Very familiar
- Extremely familiar

The following 4 blocks were presented in a random order to each respondent, and questions in each block were presented in random order. Block 6 was always presented following block 5.

[BLOCK 3]

It is a common view that the group usually called Jews are descended from the Israelites. There are also those who assert that other ethnic or racial groups are descended from the Israelites.

Please tell us what position most closely describes your views on the following statements:

[QBHI2]

Modern black Americans are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[QBHI3]

Many nonwhite groups in the United States, including, for example, Latin American or Native American people, are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

[QBHI4]

Modern-day Jews are directly descended from the ancient Israelites.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree

[Block 4]

[QFeelings]

Groups were randomized

Now we're going to ask you about your feelings toward a number of groups. We'll use a "feelings thermometer." On the thermometer, a rating of zero degrees means that you feel as cold and negative as possible. A rating of 100 degrees means that you feel as warm and positive as possible. You would rate the group at 50 degrees if you don't feel particularly positive or negative toward the group. How do you feel toward...

African Americans 0 <----->100

Whites 0 <----->100

Hispanics 0 <----->100

Asians 0 <----->100

Christians 0 <----->100

Jews 0 <----->100

Muslims 0 <----->100

Black Hebrew Israelites 0 <----->100



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[Block 5]

Now we're going to ask you some questions about Jewish Americans. For the remainder of these questions, when the survey refers to Jews, it means people usually considered to be Jews by most Americans. Please tell us what position most closely describes your views on the following statements:

[QJew1]

Jews are more loyal to Israel than to America.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

[QJew2]

It is appropriate for opponents of Israel's policies and actions to boycott Jewish-American-owned businesses in their communities.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

[QJew3]

Jews in the United States have too much power.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[QJew4]

Relative to other white people, Jews were significantly more involved in and profited more from the transatlantic slave trade.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

[QJew5]

Jews are descended from Esau, the brother of the biblical Jacob, rather than from Jacob, as is commonly claimed.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know

[QJew6]

Jews are descended from Satan.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[Block 6]

Now we want to ask you some questions about the appropriateness of responses in certain situations.

What do you think about an adult man punching an adult male stranger in the following situations?

[QHit1]

If the stranger was in a protest march showing opposition to the man's views?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[QHit2]

If the stranger was drunk and bumped into the man and his wife on the street?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[QHit3]

If the stranger was beating up a woman and the man saw it?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[QHit4]

If the stranger had broken into the other man's house?

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[Block 6]

What do you think about the use of force or violence in the following situations?

[QVio1]

To advance an important political objective that you support.

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[QVio2]

To oppose the government when it does not share your beliefs.

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support
- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[QVio3]

To prevent discrimination based on race or ethnicity.

- Strongly support
- Somewhat support



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

- Neither support nor oppose
- Somewhat oppose
- Strongly oppose

[Block 7]

Please tell us a little more about yourself:

[QDemo1]

Would you describe yourself as a “Black Hebrew Israelite” or “Hebrew Israelite”?

- Yes
- No

[QDemo2]

What is your age?

[fill in the blank]

[QDemo3]

What is your sex?

- Male
- Female
- Other
- Prefer not to say

[QDemo6] (sic)

How do you identify religiously?

- Protestant
- Catholic
- Jewish
- Muslim
- None
- Other



How Many Are the Black Hebrew Israelites?

[QDemo7]

Do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or something else?

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Something else

[QDemo8]

On a scale from very liberal to very conservative, how would you say you lean politically?

- Very liberal
- Somewhat liberal
- Moderate
- Somewhat conservative
- Very conservative

[QDemo9]

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- 2-year degree
- 4-year degree
- Master's/professional degree
- Doctorate

[QDemo10]

How often would you say you visit social media websites?

- Several times a day
- Once a day
- Several times a week
- Rarely
- Never

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