THE RISE AND FALL OF THE JEWISH INDIAN THEORY

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No conference dealing with Menasseh ben Israel would be complete without a discussion of the Jewish Indian theory, which was dealt with in Menasseh’s most famous work, The Hope of Israel. Though Menasseh was far from an advocate of the view, his discussion became crucial at the time, and was revived and revived until well into the nineteenth century. The history of the theory provides an insight into the changing ways Europeans and European Americans saw their place in the world, and the changing ways they perceived the world.

This paper will deal with the crisis about interpreting the American Indians around 1650, with Menasseh’s resolution of this crisis, with the impact his resolution had on millenarian thinking and politics in the second half of the seventeenth century, with the revival of Menasseh’s theory in colonial America, with the struggle over the Jewish Indian theory in early United States history until it was rejected by President Jefferson, with the lingering aspects of the view in other nineteenth-century theories, and, finally, with its demise with the rise of racist anthropology and American nationalism.

Whenever I tell students in America that there was a serious theory years ago that the Indians were Jews, and that some of the Lost Tribes were located in America, they look blankly at me as if it’s my nonsense, or they laugh embarrassedly to be in a room were such things are said. However, I quickly try to calm their fears by pointing out that after Columbus met the Indians in 1492, there was a problem of accounting for who they were and where they came from. If everyone on the surface of the earth was a descendant of Adam and Eve and the seven survivors of the Flood, then the Indians had to be connected to the Biblical world. Columbus himself had no problem. He thought they were Asians, since he was sure that he had reached Cathay. Amerigo Vespucci was a bit more baffled. He knew that the Indians were not Stoics or Epicureans, but was not sure who they might be. The Pope declared the Indians to be fully human. Various ex-

1 The Papal Bull is dated June 9, 1537. On it see Lewis Hanke, The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America (Philadelphia, 1949); and R.H. Popkin, “The Pre-Adamite
plorers and missionaries offered theories tracing the Indians back to migrations from the Middle-East — from Phoenicia, Arabia, or maybe from Solomon’s Ophir. To deny a Biblical origin for the Indians was to see them, and their history, as outside of Scripture, and Scripture as incomplete and inadequate. Only a few hardy souls in the sixteenth century dared suggest this — Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, Christopher Marlowe, and maybe sir Walter Ralegh. Bruno had read about the Aztec calendar stone (which, once discovered and deciphered, was promptly buried for more than two centuries). It led him to embellish Paracelsus’ theory that there were multiple origins of mankind. Marlowe had heard of the findings of Ralegh’s trip to Virginia, and had probably met Bruno. Marlowe is supposed to have given a lecture in which he claimed that Indian history was 16,000 years old, hence much older than the world according to the Jewish calendar, or according to the revised dating system of Archbishop Ussher.

In the early seventeenth century various Spanish explorers and theologians debated the origins of the Indians, always indicating that the solution had to involve tracing them back to their Biblical roots. More and more refined theories developed, some just simple migration views to the effect that the Indians, like the Europeans, Asians and Africans, all got to where they are now living by migration after Noah’s Flood and the dispersion after the Tower of Babel episode. Detailed histories of European, Asian and African travels already existed, and ones suitable to account for the Indians were added. Most of these were not intended to glorify or extol the virtues of the Indians, who were being horribly exploited by the Conquistadores. Only the theory of Bartolomé de las Casas, the defender of the Indians, involved first making them co-equal descendants of Adam and Eve, better people than the Europeans because they had not been corrupted, and some even the very best people, the Elect described by St. Paul who are to be preserved until the end of time to rejoin Jesus in his Kingdom on Earth. Las Casas and his followers, who tried to create a millennial state without Spanish Conquistadores in Guatemala, introduced a supernatural element into theories about the Indians, namely that some of them


2 Popkin, op. cit., pp. 57 and 63-64; Lynn Glaser, Indians or Jews? (Gilroy, CA, 1973), chap. 2. Two Spanish writers at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Joseph de Acosta and Gregorio García, insisted that one had to accept that the Indians were somehow descended from Adam and Eve, in order not to contradict Scripture. Citations are given in Popkin, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

3 See Popkin, op. cit., pp. 57-62.

4 See Lynn Glaser, Indians or Jews?, chap. 2, and the authors quoted there.