



## *View of the Hebrews* Ethan Smith (1825)

*Ethan Smith was a white Congregational minister in New England. In 1823, he authored a book in which he expounded a version of an idea that had circulated among English-speaking Christians for at least two centuries: that indigenous Americans were descended from ancient Israelites. The selections here come from the book's second, expanded edition.*

*In Smith's conception, indigenous Americans were descended from the ten Israelite tribes whom the Assyrian empire conquered and deported around 700 BCE. Smith was inspired by a passage in the Protestant Apocrypha, which says that the ten tribes migrated "into a further country, where never mankind dwelt" (2 Esdras 13:40-47). According to Smith, Euro-Americans had a mission to help God reunify and repatriate the people of Israel, as prophesied in the Old Testament. Euro-Americans would do this by Christianizing the ten tribes' American descendants and, eventually, transporting them back to their God-given homeland in the Middle East.*

*Within a decade of the publication of Ethan Smith's book, a new religious movement arose with a similar (yet, in its way, distinctive) imagining of indigenous Americans and a similar sense of mission. Latter-day Saints, or Mormons, embraced The Book of Mormon, an account of ancient Israelite migration to the Americas published in 1830 by white farmer Joseph Smith Jr.—no relation to Ethan Smith, but also from New England.*

*[“Suppose you should find things like these”]*

Suppose an extensive continent had lately been discovered, away northeast from Media and at the distance of “a year and a half’s journey,” a place probably destitute of inhabitants since the flood till the time of the “casting out” of Israel. Suppose a people to have been lately discovered in that sequestered region, appearing as we should rationally expect the nation of Israel to appear at this period, had the account given by the writer in Esdras been a fact. Suppose them to be found in tribes, with heads of tribes, but destitute of letters and in a savage state. Suppose, among their different tribes, the following traditionary fragments are by credible witnesses picked up—some particulars among one region of them, and some among another, while all appear evidently to be of the same family. Suppose them to have escaped the polytheism of the pagan world and to acknowledge one, and only one, God, the Great Spirit [...] Suppose the most intelligent of them to be elated with the idea that this God has ever been the head of their community; that their fathers were once in covenant with him, and the rest of the world were “the accursed people,” as out of covenant with God. Suppose you find them, on certain occasions, singing in religious dance, *Hallelujah*, or “praise to Jah”; also, singing *Yohewah*, *Shilu Yohewah*, and making use of many names and phrases evidently Hebrew. You find them counting their time as did ancient Israel and in a manner different from all other nations. They keep a variety of religious feasts, which much resemble those kept in ancient Israel. [...] You find them with their temples, into which it is utterly prohibited for a common person to enter. They have their high priests, who officiate in their temples and make their yearly atonement there in a singular pontifical dress, which they fancy to be in the likeness of one worn by their predecessors in ancient times [...] All their males must appear at the temple at three noted feasts in a year. They inform you of the ancient flood, of the preservation of one family in a vessel [...] They tell you of

the confusion of languages, once when people were building a high place [...] You find them most scrupulously practicing a religious rite of separating their women, which almost precisely answers to the ancient law of Moses upon this subject. And many other things you find among this newly discovered people, which seem exclusively to have been derived from the ceremonial code of ancient Israel.

Suppose you should find things like these among such a people [...] Would you hesitate to say [that] you had found the ten tribes of Israel, and that God sent them to that sequestered region of the earth to keep them there a distinct people during an “outcast” state of at least 2500 years? [...]

These things are more than mere supposition. [...] Good authorities, from men who have been eye- and earwitnesses, assure us that these things are facts. But, you inquire, where or who are the people thus described? They are *the aborigines of our own continent!* [...]

[“*The greater part became savage*”]

Some have felt a difficulty arising, against the Indians being the ten tribes, from their ignorance of the mechanical arts, of writing, and of navigation. Ancient Israel knew something of these; and some imagine that these arts, being once known, could never be lost. But no objection is hence furnished against our scheme. The knowledge of mechanic arts possessed in early times has been lost by many nations. [...]

The probability, then, is this: that the ten tribes, arriving in this continent with some knowledge of the arts of civilized life, finding themselves in a vast wilderness filled with the best of game, inviting them to the chase—most of them fell into a wandering, idle hunting life. Different clans parted from each other, lost each other, and formed separate tribes. Most of them formed a habit of this idle mode of living and were pleased with it. More sensible parts of this people associated together to improve their knowledge of the arts and probably continued thus for ages. From these, the noted relics of civilization discovered in the west and south were furnished. But the savage tribes prevailed; and in process of time, their savage jealousies and rage annihilated their more civilized brethren. [...] This accounts for their loss of the knowledge of letters, of the art of navigation, and of the use of iron. [...]

This hypothesis accounts for the ancient works, forts, mounds, and vast enclosures, as well as tokens of a good degree of civil improvement, which are manifestly very ancient and from centuries before Columbus discovered America. These magnificent works have been found, one near Newark in Licking County, Ohio; one in Perry County, Ohio; one at Marietta; one at Circleville; one on Paint Creek; one on the eastern bank of the Little Miami River, Warren County; one on Paint Creek near Chillicothe; one on the Scioto River; and other places. These works have evinced great wars, a good degree of civilization, and great skill in fortification. And articles dug from old mounds in and near those fortified places clearly evince that their authors possessed no small degree of refinement in the knowledge of the mechanic arts.

These partially civilized people became extinct. What account can be given of this but that the savages extirpated them after long and dismal wars? And nothing appears more probable than that they were the better part of the Israelites who came to this continent, who for a long time

retained their knowledge of the mechanic and civil arts, while the greater part of their brethren became savage and wild. [...]

But however vindictive the savages must have been—however cruel and horrid in extirpating their more civilized brethren—yet it is a fact that there are many excellent traits in their original character. There is in the minds of the native Americans a quality far superior to what is found in the minds of most other heathen on earth, and such as might have been expected from the descendants of the ancient Israel of God, as appears from numerous testimonies [...] A Rev. Mr. Cushman, in a sermon preached at Plymouth in 1620, says upon the base slanders uttered against the Indians: “The Indians are said to be the most cruel and treacherous people—like lions; but to us they have been like lambs, so kind and submissive and trusty that a man may truly say many Christians are not so kind and sincere.[...]” Governor Hutchinson says of them: “The natives showed courtesy to the English at their first arrival—were hospitable, and made such as would eat their food welcome to it, and readily instructed them in planting and cultivating the Indian corn.[...]” William Penn spake and wrote in the highest terms of the kindness and benevolence of this people. [...]

These are a few of innumerable testimonies to the same point, relative to the moral character of the natives of America. Certainly, then, they have deserved better treatment than they received from the whites. And these things furnish a rich quota of evidence that they probably had as good an origin as from the ancient people of Israel. [...]

*[“Save the remnant of my people”]*

The writer might fill a chapter in illustrating the wrongs which the Indians have suffered from people in our land, in noting their reduced and deplorable situation, in pleading the cause of humanity in their behalf, and in appealing to the magnanimous feelings of the people of our nation. He might adduce many evangelical motives, the most commanding, to enforce the duty of saving the remnant of the natives of our continent from extinction and from wretchedness. The duty of sending them the gospel, and of being at any expense to teach them Christianity and the blessings of civilized life, is great and urgent on every principle of humanity and general benevolence. And this duty peculiarly attaches itself to the people who are now in possession of the former inheritance of those natives, and from too many of whom that people have received insufferable injuries. This subject must occur with force to the mind of every well informed American. And it is devoutly to be hoped that far greater attention will henceforth be paid to it by all among us who make any pretense to humanity, not to say piety. [...]

Various things are found, in the predictions of the restoration of God’s ancient people, which strikingly accord with the idea of a great branch of them being recovered from this land and by the agency of the people of our states. [...W]e may [...] imagine ourselves as though seated in the audience of the prophet Isaiah—may imagine him sighing at the long and dreadful exilement of his brethren of Israel and uttering the following sentiments of the holy prophetic spirit:

Ho, thou nation of the last days, shadowing with thy wings of liberty and peace: pity, instruct, and save my ancient people and brethren, especially that outcast branch of them who were the natives of your soil. Pity that degraded remnant of a nation, so terrible in ancient times but who

have been now so long wretched. [...] Were not your fathers sent into that far distant world, not only to be (in their posterity) built up a great protecting nation, but also to be the instruments of gathering, or recovering, the miserable remnant of my outcasts there in the last days? Rejoice, then, ye distinguished people, in your birthright, and engage in the work by heaven assigned. Let not those tribes of my ancient people, whom I have borne as on eagles' wings for so many ages—let them not become extinct before your eyes; let them no longer roam in savage barbarism and death! [...] Send them the word, the bread of life. You received that book from the seed of Abraham. [...] Remember, then, your debt of gratitude to God's ancient people for the word of life. Restore it to them [...] Learn them its history and their own. Teach them the story of their ancestors, the economy of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sublimate their views above the savage pursuits of the forests. Elevate them above the wilds of barbarism [...] Tell them the time draws near, and they must now return to the God of their salvation. [...] Assure them that this "talk of an ancient prophet" is for them, and they must listen to it and obey it; that the Great Spirit above the clouds now calls them, by you, to come and receive his grace by Christ [...], who has come and to whom the people must be gathered. [...]

Go, thou nation highly distinguished in the last days; save the remnant of my people. Bring me a present of them "to the place of the name of the Lord of hosts, the Mount Zion."

**Source:** Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews; Or, The Tribes of Israel in America*, 2nd ed. (Poultney, VT: Smith & Shute, 1825), 75-79, 171-177, 227, 230, 247-250, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.ah692e>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

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