

House of Yahweh and Yisrayl (Buffalo Bill) Hawkins

Posted by Jake on March 13, 1998 at 16:53:28:

The following are selected excerpts from an article found in the July, 1997 issue of the "Texas Monthly" about the House of Yahweh located in Abilene. I thought it might be interesting reading for those who would like some extra insight into the House of Yahweh and Yisrayl Hawkins, a.k.a. Buffalo Bill Hawkins.

Happy Doomsday

Another Waco--or simply wacko? That's the lingering question about Abilene's House of Yahweh, the latest Texas cult with a charismatic leader of questionable integrity who has visions of the end of the world.

by Robert Draper

...Then there was the church's leader, a folksy 62-year-old ex-cop and ex-rockabilly singer known as Buffalo Bill Hawkins until 1982, when he legally changed his first name to Yisrayl (pronounced like "Israel"). Hawkins had convinced thousands of Yahweh worshippers that he and one of his brothers were the two "witnesses" prophesied in the Book of Isaiah to preach the laws of Yahweh. Though Hawkins didn't claim to be the Messiah, his faithful believed him incapable of misjudgment or sin. They also believed that to defy him was to defy the Creator. Since 1994 some three hundred of them had legally adopted his last name and joined his "priestly family."

...In almost every other way, however, Yisrayl Hawkins is Abilene's encore to Waco's Koresh. A sometime musician, inveterate philanderer, and lifelong Bible student with a doomsdayer's fetish for the Book of Revelation, his unorthodox brand of charisma is detectable only within the perimeters of his cloistered universe. Of course, Hawkins has other antecedents as well. They are seen in Mark Twain novels and Flannery O'Connor short stories, behind mail-order miracle cures and flimsy pyramid schemes, and wherever else a good con flourishes. Hawkins' snake oil, bootlegged as it is from the Garden of Eden, is particularly potent. It has summoned everyday seekers of higher meaning, and it has convinced them--through a transparently brazen manipulation of the Scriptures--that their religion is somehow more authentic, and thus holier, than other spiritual callings. It seems even to have cast a spell over its purveyor, such that Yisrayl Hawkins himself cannot seem to see, beneath his gaudy new aura, the Buffalo Bill Hawkins who connives within.

The dubious history of the House of Yahweh is nothing more than a culmination of one man's life of con artistry, a white-trash quest for a scruffy empire that would be thoroughly comical were it not for its many dupes. Though Hawkins' colorful saga is not complete, it suggests a comforting outcome: Abilene will not burn as Waco burned. For this compound is but a very peculiar house, and one made of cards at that.

...Failure and ridicule: that was Hawkins' winning formula. In seventeen years his church had grown out of a trailer home in Abilene to become an entity whose three annual feasts (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacle) were attended by literally thousands, from as far away as Trinidad and Australia. The House of Yahweh published numerous texts and had its own Web site (www.yahweh.com). Millions of dollars in tithes poured in annually to its office on Abilene's T&P Lane (the T and P standing for Texas and Pacific, but nowadays referred to by the congregation as Truth and Prophecy). Yisrayl Hawkins had reared a giant. The world was cluttered with religions far more illustrious, but his enemies would make his House the chosen one: So said the Scriptures, and where they failed to say so, they would then be "retranslated" until they cooperated.

What could be a more perfect scam than to turn a man's advantage the deck stacked against him? On August 28, 1934, a dirt poor sharecropper named Otis Hawkins and his wife, Maggie, gave birth to their sixth of eight children near Purcell, Oklahoma, where they lived in a three-room house without indoor plumbing. Apparently having run out of names, the parents asked one of their children, Vernon, if he had any in mind for his infant brother. "Buffalo Bill," proclaimed the boy.

A recently published book by Yisrayl Hawkins states that he "is a Jew whose family was severely persecuted and forced to flee from Europe to the United States. He was raised without synagogue, but was strictly taught by his Jewish parents, both of whom trace their lineage to the tribe of Levi." When this passage was read to one of Hawkins' brothers, he sighed before saying, "Bill's my brother, but he ain't got both oars in the water, if you know what I mean. Our daddy was a Dutchman, our mother was three-quarters Cherokee, and we don't have a drop of Jewish blood in us." Maggie Hawkins did, however, read her Bible and pray on her knees three times daily. Otis Hawkins was not religious at all, but one of Bill's brothers-in-law, Major Followwill, remembered, "Mister Hawkins would give you the shirt off his back. There weren't finer people in the world than Bill's parents. And there isn't a bigger liar in the world than Bill Hawkins."

While other children helped their father farm his crops and break horses, Buffalo Bill prowled about Purcell on a pony, a floppy brown hat stuck atop his head and a fat hand-rolled cigarette between his teeth. He regularly played hooky from school until the fifth grade, when he dropped out altogether. Early on, though, he displayed a talent for making money, though not necessarily through honorable means. Before his teenage years Bill was skinning cats and taking the meat to the black side of town, where he would sell it off as rabbit.

In 1952 eighteen-year-old Bill Hawkins and a woman named Rosa Bell Boulding married in Muskogee and soon relocated to Enid. A year later Rosa Bell moved out. Hawkins would later say that his wife had cheated on him, but relatives remember that it was he who had gone outside the marriage. The new woman, a Native American named Darlene, moved in and in short order bore him four children. Hawkins introduced Darlene to others as his wife and told his offspring that their parents had eloped. Many years later--after one of his children caught him in bed with another woman and Darlene moved out with the four in tow--the mother confessed to them that she and Hawkins had married in Mexico. Regardless of which account is true, Bill Hawkins had not yet divorced his first wife, Rosa Bell, and would not file against her until 1976, four years after his second wife left him. When I pointed this out to Hawkins, he insisted, "[Rosa Bell] had actually divorced me long before this, in California. That's what she told my dad in a phone call." None of Hawkins' relatives remembered hearing of such a conversation, and in any case, his own attorney could find no record of Rosa Bell's filing for divorce in any courthouse in either California or Oklahoma. By filing for divorce himself, Hawkins was legally acknowledging that he had been married to Rosa Bell throughout his marriage to Darlene.

Odd that a taste for religion would materialize on such a tongue. But Hawkins' eldest brother, J.G.--who had long been intrigued by both Judaism and the literalist teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God--took Bill under his wing. Bill followed him to Midwestern Bible College in Stanberry, Missouri, but lasted only two semesters. "Oh, he was religious all right," scoffed Major Followwil, himself a former Baptist minister. "He was religious about making money."

Hawkins took to peddling Bibles door-to-door with J.G. after following him to the North Texas town of Graham in the early fifties. While J.G. knew his Scriptures better, Bill was "definitely the better salesman," remembered a relative, "because he could look you right in the eye and lie through his teeth. He could charm a rattler." On the other side Bill sold icemakers. The machines didn't work, but the folks he approached wouldn't have known that, since Bill loaded the contraptions with ice he had previously frozen in his home icemaker. He also sang in his brothers' rockabilly band, Buffalo Bill and His Whippoowills. Because he booked the band's engagements, he collected the gate receipts--and, as one of his band mates noted ruefully, "he always kept the biggest part of the money for himself."

..For the next nine years Buffalo Bill Hawkins led a steady if undistinguished career as an Abilene cop, and spiritually he was at a low ebb. Though he still took his family to church on Saturday mornings, Hawkins worked on religious holidays and spent his off-hours raising coonhounds, operating a mobile home park--which his wife was not even aware that he owned--and making homemade wine. When Darlene was due to have their last daughter, Officer Hawkins simply dropped her off at the hospital on the way to the station and told her to call when the baby was born. Often irritable, he frequently beat Darlene in the presence of his kinfolk. One of his daughters remembered how he reacted when she and her sister burned the potatoes one evening: "He threw them against the wall and made us go to our rooms. Then he came in with a wire hangar and whipped our legs till they bled. And then he pulled off his belt and whipped us some more."

After Darlene learned in 1972 that Hawkins had slept with another woman, it occurred to her that she had given her life and her money to a remorseless cad, so she and their children moved back to Oklahoma. Less than a year later Hawkins took up with a woman named Kay who lived in his trailer park, and together they had a child out of wedlock. In 1974 he learned that his father was dying. He hastened to Otis Hawkins' residence in Graham, where he loaded up his father's pigs into his father's truck, and proceeded to sell them both. "Well," sighed the sharecropper, "I guess Bill needs the money."

In 1975 J.G. Hawkins returned to Texas from a seven-year stint in Israel. While there, Buffalo Bill's eldest brother had begun calling himself Jacob and had learned of an excavation in which a Hebrew inscription had been found that read "House of Yahweh." "It was like a current of electricity went through my body," Jacob would later write. He set out to found a church by that name in Texas. Bill showed Jacob a vacant field he owned in Abilene and suggested that they establish the House of Yahweh there. Instead, Jacob moved to Odessa, where he acquired a small church and began to gather worshippers.

...Buffalo Bill Hawkins watched his brother's church grow, and his envy grew correspondingly. In 1977 he resigned from the Abilene Police Department. A year later he persuaded Jacob to ordain him as a minister, and about the same time, he resolved to overcome his long-standing insecurities about his humble beginnings and feeble education. He plunked down \$500 and enrolled in a Dale Carnegie public-speaking course. All Bill Hawkins lacked was a church.

In 1980 Hawkins opened up his own House of Yahweh in his Abilene mobile home. ...A family friend, Ruby Maynard, began attending services regularly despite knowing Bill primarily as "the kind of guy who would always try to make money if he could." Her wariness was confirmed when she noticed that some folding chairs and living room furniture turned up missing. Maynard learned that Hawkins had reclaimed and moved them into the trailers he was renting as "furnished."

One day in 1982 the minister strolled into the Taylor County courthouse in Abilene and petitioned that his first name be changed. He strolled out as Yisrayl Hawkins. Kay Hawkins remembered his breathless excitement a few days later when he approached her with Bible in hand, his finger pointing to Isaiah 43: "But now thus saith the Lord that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine...Ye are my witnesses." Surely the Hawkins brothers were none other than the prophesied two witnesses, Jacob and Yisrayl, called upon by Yahweh to rebuild His temple in the world's waning days!

Today Yisrayl Hawkins says, "Ever since 1951 we [he and Jacob] talked about us being the two witnesses. We weren't sure about this until the early eighties." If this is true, then his decision to change his first name could be viewed as a brazen ploy to fulfill the Scriptures, and his display of emotion to Kay could only be fakery. But those who knew Jacob, both in his congregation and in the Hawkins family, said that the older brother never believed himself to be a witness. In 1986 Jacob--long since dismayed by Yisrayl's deceptions--assured a friend in a letter, "No one at this time knows who the two witnesses are. They will be two men from the House of Yahweh, but Yahweh has not revealed who they are, and you can be assured that they will not be teaching what is taught in Abilene."

But in 1982 Kay was convinced that her husband was Chosen. Together they wrote a pamphlet titled "The Two Witnesses," a 36-page attempt to prove that Jacob and Yisrayl were the two in question--as opposed to other oft-cited potential candidates, including Cyrus and Alexander, Moses and Elijah. The pamphlet is the first of many the House of Yahweh would publish that would rely upon methods of "retranslation" so calculatedly arbitrary that the authors would likely be laughed out of any language school on the planet. Take, for example, their tortured analysis of the crucial Isa. 44:5 phrase..."and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the Lord, and surname himself by the name of Israel." To prove that the passage means that a man such as Buffalo Bill Hawkins would legally change his name to Yisrayl, the authors first isolated the Hebrew word for "subscribe," *kathab*--which can mean "write," "describe," "inscribe," "prescribe," "record," or "subscribe." The authors chose two of these six definitions to bolster their case. The first is "prescribe," which as a verb has three definitions. The authors selected the third: "to assert a right or title to something on the grounds of prescription." The

second definition of katab they chose is "record," and from several listed definitions they picked, "an official written report of public proceedings, as in a legislature or court of law, preserved for future reference." This definition is meant to apply to a noun, and the word in question--katab--is a verb. Still, after this series of ill-advised leaps, "The Two Witnesses" concludes, "Not only will one of the two witnesses be 'surnamed' Yisrayl, he will take this name legally--in a court of law--just as the prophecy has proclaimed!"

Yisrayl Hawkins had discovered a con of biblical proportions. Rooting through the Scriptures for golden acorns of prophecy was an age-old pastime, as was foretelling the Second Coming.

...His brother Jacob would occasionally confide, "Bill is not only deceiving the people--he's deliberately deceiving the people." ...None of Hawkins' other family members or ex-wives resided near enough to Abilene to expose him as a scoundrel. Kay "bought the whole thing," she now admits--a crucial alliance, since her poorly educated husband relied heavily upon her to research and script the propaganda that the House of Yahweh would pass off as proof.

The most staggering coincidence in Hawkins' favor was that the word "Abilene" actually appears in the Bible, in Luke 3:1, cited in passing as a Gentile province. Predictably, Hawkins made major hay with the reference. In his pamphlet "The House of Yahweh Established," he devoted 42 pages to proving that "Abilene" was pregnant with prophetic meaning. After studying these Hebrew-intensive pages at my request, New Testament professor John Alsup of the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary listed all of Hawkins' typical tricks without knowing anything about him: selective use of definitions, habitual decontextualizing, and with respect to Hawkins' analysis of the -ene suffix in "Abilene," a basic ignorance of Hebrew. "It's a mess," Alsup told me.

For the linguistically challenged, Hawkins had another way to prove Abilene's significance. Noting that the Scriptures suggested that Yahweh's new temple would be located due west of Jerusalem, Hawkins wrote: "Now look on any world globe, find the city of Yerusalem, Israyl, then go directly west on the exact latitude, and you will move directly to the city of Abilene, Texas!" Jacob Hawkins had claimed the same thing about Odessa as a geographically prophesied location for the House of Yahweh. When I mentioned this to Yisrayl Hawkins, he shook his head and said, "No, not quite. If you look it up, Odessa is not quite due west." I looked it up. Jerusalem's latitude is 31,47. Odessa's is 31,50. Abilene's is 32,27.

...But in 1991 his power base received a serious jolt when Jacob fell ill with cancer. The Odessa preacher's scorn for the Abilene church had been a thorn in Yisrayl's side. "That whole thing up there has been a deception from the very beginning," Jacob wrote one mutual friend. congregation members who didn't know how Jacob felt about the Abilene House would regularly ask Yisrayl, "When will the other witness come to our feasts?" Still, Jacob's existence, coupled with his silence, was crucial to the younger Hawkins' prophetic status. Jacob's death that year made a sham of Yisrayl's two-witness scenario. It must have been doubly devastating when, at the Odessa funeral home, Yisrayl fell upon Jacob's corpse and tried in vain to resurrect him.

News of the witness's demise was kept from the Abilene congregation for a time while Hawkins consulted with his elders. They emerged with a remarkable pronouncement. The Hebrew Scriptures had been examined and found to be incorrectly rendered. A new translation of Isaiah 43 was supplied, to be pasted into each member's Book of Yahweh. In this version Jacob had been destined to die all along, while Yisrayl would survive as the lone witness. With only a handful of exceptions, the congregation went along. The House stood.

...But even from a distance, he kept his people close. Guards searched the tents of those encamping for the feasts to make sure they weren't reading literature that was counter to the doctrines. His elders excommunicated anyone suspected of challenging Yahweh's orders. Members were forbidden to attend other church services, including weddings of family members. And those who moved to the 44 acres could buy a share of the property--including a trailer, which Hawkins himself would sell to them at many times its value--but the land deeds would continue to belong to the House of Yahweh. "We always broke the laws," recalled Michael Sharrow, who moved his family to the compound in 1991. "We'd have sex on the Sabbath. That was okay, as long as Hawkins thought you were useful. But if he wanted you out, they'd find any excuse to expel you."

They were free, in other words, to do exactly what Hawkins told them to.

...Instead, a far more arresting development took place that fall, when the pope orchestrated a peace agreement between Israel and the Arab nations. Yisrayl Hawkins seized upon the seemingly ho-hum treaty like a piranha. This, he declared, was it: the seven-year agreement, prophesied in Dan. 9:24-27, facilitated by "the beastly system"--the Catholic church and the league of governments--that would usher in the seven-year malaise known as the Tribulation, ending in a nuclear holocaust that would wipe out four fifths of the world's population. Hawkins' proclamation involved the usual dubious leaps of logic, especially the significance he attached to the Scripture's use of the Hebrew word for "many"--rabim, which Yisrayl construed to be "Rabin," the name of Israel's prime minister. ("That word appears maybe two hundred times in the Scriptures," biblical scholar Steve Reid of the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary told me. "If all those references are to Rabin, he's really a busy guy.")

But the members--who had heard similar foretellings from Hawkins in 1991, when Saddam Hussein ranted about "the mother of all wars"--were more than ready to believe their overseer. They were put on notice: By October 2000 their elite status would be confirmed, and the Messiah would arrive to reward them. Mindful that the Scriptures promised a drought during the first three and a half years of the Tribulation, the House of Yahweh began to stockpile food. Hawkins ordered the purchase of truckloads of wheat. A trailer was crammed full of edible goods and buried near the sanctuary. By the time the food underground began to spoil, the ground was already moist from winter showers. A pro by now at such turns of events, Hawkins' elders spread the word that the biblical passage was merely a metaphor. What they meant to say was, "These years would feature an absence of spiritual rain." And no one had better ask aloud: "Were the previous years spiritually soggy?"

...Yet even in their acquiescent state, the congregation was not prepared for the new law introduced in a sermon by elder Kepha Arcemont on July 24, 1993. After drilling into their skulls a host of passages reminding those present that all laws must be obeyed without question, Arcemont informed them that multiple marriages were sanctioned by Yahweh.

Kay Hawkins smelled a rat and believed its name was Yisrayl. She knew her husband had once been an adulterer--among her proof being their first son--and had in recent years endured the rumors that the overseer had been plucking female prospects from the House's congregation. A strong-willed, intelligent woman, Kay nonetheless had developed an emotional investment in her husband's dubious ascendancy. Being the wife of a Chosen One had its cachet, after all. Like so many former members, she would one day look back in amazement at the lines she'd been fed. Unlike the others, Kay had penned many of the lines herself. The rumors of Yisrayl's infidelity proved to be gilded to the extreme. I spoke with two of the four women said to be his lovers, and both said the affairs never went further than "passionate kissing," which of course is subjective. But it seems clear that Hawkins singled out these women, giving them access to him that was denied the rest--and certainly showed no concern toward the feelings of his wife, who had always stood by him, keeping secret those private moments when nasty old Buffalo Bill Hawkins surfaced.

And so Kay Hawkins challenged the new polygamy law, citing a multitude of Bible passages. She was ignored. In the summer of 1994 she filed for divorce and was excommunicated by the elders. Yisrayl also banished his son Justin from the 44 acres, after judging him unfaithful to Yahweh--and after accusing him (falsely, Justin insists) of stealing \$40,000 in cash that the overseer inexplicably kept in his house. "You're a liar and a thief!" he hollered to his son as two guards led the latter away.

...By April nearly three hundred House of Yahweh members had legally changed their last names to Hawkins, following their overseer's "discovery" that the Hebrew version of Yisrayl's last name was Ha-Cohen, or "the priest." None of them thought to visit Graham or Odessa or Purcell, Oklahoma, to trace their priest's ancestry firsthand. For as elder Shaul Schneider Hawkins would put it in a sermon, "It is impossible for the very elect to be deceived...[and] Yahweh has consolidated His only work into one group, under the witness Yisrayl, the very elect of Yahweh." There was no other truth, and thus no other choice, but to bend their wills to the will of Yisrayl Hawkins and prepare for the almighty conflagration of October 2000. As the overseer himself told me, while chuckling in his not altogether merry way: "I think you'd have to be a fool not to believe."

One fool, a former colleague at the Abilene Police Department, dared to advance a prophecy of his own. "Come the year 2000," said deputy chief Noah Johnston with a smile, "I'd be willing to bet Buffalo Bill Hawkins is gonna ride off into the sunset with a big pile of money."