Positive Feedback Loops and Religious Insularity:

A Case Study of the Israelite House of David

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I would like to Dr. Richard Feinberg for his patient guidance in the writing and editing of this thesis. Thank you also to the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Mark Seeman and Dr. Wendy Wilson-Fall, and Caroline Tannert for their help in the completion and submission of this thesis. Lastly I thank Neal Christiansen and Tremie Gregory for helping to keep me going when the going got hard.
Preface: Motivations in Choosing a Thesis Topic

I have a long history with the IHD. My great-great-grandfather, Thomas Meldrim II, moved his family from Cripple Creek, Colorado to Benton Harbor, Michigan to join the IHD during the early years of the colony. One of his children, Edith, married colony member and famous trumpet player Clarence Bell, and the two became prominent members in the management of the colony. Though my great-grandfather left the colony as a young man, both my father and grandfather spent a lot of time with their relatives there as children and young adults.

When my family returned to Southwest Michigan after spending almost twenty years living on the East Coast, my father became involved in a project with the Benton Harbor Public Library to catalogue its extensive collection of IHD photos, letters, and other documents. As a child, I spent many evenings doing homework among the stacks as my father worked with the librarians to scan photos and film interviews with surviving colony members. That project resulted in the database that served as one of my primary sources of information on the IHD. All of the photos featured in this thesis came from that database. Equally important were my meetings and correspondence with Ron Taylor, one of the last surviving members, and the current manager, of Mary’s City of David. My meetings with Ron gave me an opportunity to ask specific questions that were not answered in my library research.

When I first considered the IHD as a potential thesis topic, I was primarily interested in using it as a case study of a religious group that fully embraced the use of
popular culture in its proselytizing techniques. I wanted to use this case study to anchor a larger discussion of how globalization has influenced the proselytizing techniques used by modern religious groups. I was particularly interested by how sensitive the IHD was to the fluctuation of different medium styles. For example, their touring musical groups consisted mostly of marching bands in the first two decades of the 1900s, then shifted to jazz during the 1920s and 1930s, before embracing a big band sound in the 1940s. As I delved into this subject, I became increasingly aware of the odd paradox that the IHD presented: an insular, communal group that was removed from the greater community while at the same time being immersed in it. I put all of these ideas together into my current thesis topic when I began to read about the problems that escalating insularity can create for a religious group, as well as the use of feedback loops to explain the evolution of social systems.
Chapter I: The Nature of Cults, Sects, and Millennial Movements

Introduction

Many religions began as cults. In modern times, *cult* and *sect* have become four letter words, their mention evoking thoughts of *cult* brainwashing and *sectarian* violence. People who shy away from these words rarely stop to think that when they attend church, mosque, or synagogue, they are, in reality, paying homage to religions that started out as small, disenfranchised groups of people existing beyond the accepted beliefs of the time. But how do these groups function and evolve? How did a sect that originated with one man and a few apostles morph into the many flourishing Christian sects that we know today? How did Muhammad’s followers go from being run out of one city to being the rulers of a large region in mere decades?

Some answers are to be found in the study of cult dynamics, which examines how cults and sects function and evolve. These characteristics, along with analysis of the environment in which the cult functions, can explain much about a particular group; how it coalesced, how it gained converts, how it supported itself, and how its theology and philosophy took shape. They can also help elucidate why one cult flourishes and another does not.

The goal of this thesis is to introduce the concept of the insularity feedback loop. This concept uses the systems theory mechanism of the negative feedback loop to illustrate how, in a socially insular group such as a communal cult or sect, insularity
levels can build over time until they become unsustainable and cause the group to destabilize. I will briefly discuss systems theory as it relates to anthropology in support of a discussion of the concept of the insularity feedback loop. In order to illustrate the dynamics of insularity in a religious group I will present a case study of the Israelite House of David (“IHD”), a millennial sect that flourished in Benton Harbor, Michigan during the first three quarters of the twentieth century. Founded by Benjamin and Mary Purcell, the IHD makes an interesting case study of religious sect dynamics for several reasons. It has undergone many changes, both major and minor, over the course of its existence. These changes have affected the dynamics of the group, at one point causing the initial group to split into two new organizations with different dynamics. Because we have access to legal records kept by the House of David and the City of David, the two separate groups that the original IHD split into, as well as a large collection of letters by and personal interviews with past members, we have a large body of information on how these changes occurred and how they affected the groups. The IHD is also interesting because in some ways its practices coincide almost perfectly with what is predicted by the sociological models, while in other ways they are quite different. I will review the structure, theology, ideology, evangelizing techniques, and everyday life of the IHD, as well as on the lives of IHD founders, Benjamin and Mary Purnell. This discussion of the IHD will serve to illustrate how the cycle of insularity can be broken.

To establish an overarching framework for these two discussions, I will examine cult dynamics, particularly how the dynamics of millennial movements differ from other cults and sects in terms of their theology and future outlook. I will also address the issue
of institutionalization, a crucial step at which many sects and cults break down; I will assess the IHD as an example of a sect that was able to circumvent this problem. I will also explain how the issue of insularity has affected other religious groups that have had varying degrees of success at maintaining their insularity without destabilizing. Finally I will compare examples of contemporary sects, both those that have been successful and others that have ended tragically.

By examining these topics I hope to deepen our understanding of the dynamics affecting religious sects in general and the House of David in particular. By considering insularity as a self-perpetuating mechanism as opposed to a static “state of being,” I hope to understand how and why insularity functions in different groups.

**Millennial Movements**

Millennialism is a description applied to certain cults and religious movements. The term “millennial” springs from the New Testament Book of John, which states that Satan is chained up “For a thousand years… and after a thousand years the chains shall be loosened,” implying the end of the world. Millennialism preaches that the end of the world is at hand and offers last chance redemption to those who join the movement’s ranks. Millennialism is not a new phenomenon; A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1939) observed that religions can use stress to galvanize their members. Few things are more likely to produce stress than believing the end of the world is near. Christianity itself began as a messianic sect within Judaism, which, in turn, had its own predictions regarding the
coming of the Messiah and ensuing apocalypse. For this reason, both religions have a history of inspiring millennial movements (Baumgartner 2001).

A classic example of a millennial movement is the Millerite movement of the mid-nineteenth century. William Miller, a farmer turned prophet who led the movement, used a biblical passage to predict that the second coming of Christ would occur in 1843. He traveled around New England in the 1830s attracting followers and eventually leading one of the largest millennial movements in the United States (Jud 1993:18–20). Christ’s failure to return in 1843 and 1844 was termed “The Great Disappointment,” and led to the splintering of the group, with most members either joining other millennial groups or forming the group that would go on to become the Seventh Day-Adventists (Jud 1993:35).

When the predicted date marking the end of the world passes without a cataclysmic event one might expect that members of millennial movements would become disenchanted. Instead members often become even more devout. Rosabeth Kanter (1972) explained this phenomenon as a result of Peoples reluctance to give up their “sacrifice.” When people join a religion, sect, or cult, they typically have to make sacrifices in order to become members. These sacrifices may be of material (renouncing all worldly goods), emotional (abandon previously held beliefs and adhere to new ones), or physical (prospective members may go through initiation rituals, and members may be required to fast, self-flagellate, or live under harsh conditions). The sacrifice is made and members commit their time and energy to the group. As time passes, their investment in the belief system becomes so great that members are unlikely to recant, and thereby
nullify the significance of their sacrifice and investment. Thus it is no surprise that when the May 21, 2011 deadline for the Day of Judgment predicted by radio evangelist Harold Camping passed without incident, Camping was quick to say that May 21 had been “an invisible judgment day.” Camping had previously prophesied that the world would end in 1994, and after the May 21 deadline had passed, he named a date in October 2011 as the new Day of Judgment (McKinley 2011).

Most Christian denominations set the inscrutable barrier of death as the time of salvation and, therefore, their belief cannot be judged by empirical evidence. Conversely, millennial cults are, by predicting the end of the world in the near future, open to criticism if their prediction does not come to pass. The predicted date of salvation is usually set close to the present to provide urgency to the movement. When the end fails to materialize, adherents are presented with a dilemma; they may either 1) admit that they sacrificed large amounts of time and resources to an unworthy cause, or 2) recalculate the predicted date of salvation. Most believers opt for the second choice (Roberts 1984:140).

The dynamics of millennial sects are often different from those of other sects. There are two main areas in which the difference is pronounced. The first is succession. As discussed below, sociologists often study how groups manage the succession of new leaders as an indicator of how institutionalized a group is. The prevailing theory is that the smoother the transition, the higher the level of institutionalization. It is not unusual, however, for even highly institutionalized millennial cults to not have a recognized line of succession. This is because they expect the world to end soon, thus precluding the
need for a human leader. Not only do millennial cults view succession as a non-issue, but it would be heretical for any member to suggest otherwise. For members, raising the issue of succession is tantamount to saying that he or she did not believe in the coming of the day of reckoning.

The second issue where millennial groups differ from other cults/sects is longevity. Because they feel that the end of the world is at hand, many millennial cults are celibate, or at least do not place a heavy emphasis on producing children. If the point of sex is to produce children, why bother when the world is going to end and with it the need to multiply? It is often difficult to keep membership up solely by recruiting outsiders. Both the IHD and the Shakers (another communal celibate sect) have discovered how difficult it is for a group to survive when it cannot internally replenish its numbers. Some other communal religious groups, such as the Amish and the Hutterites have flourished, even when they lose members, due to their high birthrates. For this reason, the longevity of a group may not always be a reliable indicator of its success with respect to its level of institutionalization. Even an institutionalized and harmonious group will face decline if its members do not produce offspring to carry on its traditions.

**Church, Cult, and Sect**

Defining the terms “cult” and “sect” and “church” can be difficult. Each of these terms have been defined and redefined since the church-sect typology was first discussed by Weber (1922) and Troeltsch (1931). While there are many different schemes for how to
define churches, cults, and sects, the church-sect typology is useful in the case of the IHD because it was developed to deal with Christian sects that originated in eighteenth-century Europe, of which the IHD is one (Johnson 1963:539-540). It classifies religious movements as arranged on a spectrum spanning church on one end and sect on the other. Churches are defined as being large in scale, both in terms of membership and geographical reach. They often seek to temper some of the more radical teachings of the doctrine that they preach in order to appeal to a greater audience. Churches seek to gain both religious and political control. For some churches, such as Islam, politics and religion are viewed as fundamentally linked. Though not always the case, many churches depend on professional priests or other ecclesiastical staff to minister to people and run the organization. The organizations themselves are often highly stratified and hierarchical.

Religious movements that break away from the main church by seeking to practice an older, more pure form of the religion are classified as sects. Sects are smaller in scale than churches, are more likely to be removed from the world at large, and often have only one or two levels of stratification. As these sects grow and become institutionalized they may become denominations. If the denominations continue to evolve they may one day become religions in their own right (Johnson 1963:540-542). Cults, conversely, are characterized not by a wish to return to an earlier form of the religion, but by tempering tenets of an existing religion with some new revelation. Both cults and sects often coalesce around a charismatic prophet (Troeltsch 1931 and Coleman
1968:55, 57-62). Under church-sect typology, the IHD can be classified as a sect that underwent institutionalization but never reached the level of denomination.
Chapter II: The Israelite House of David

Joanna Southcott and the Seven Messengers

In the 1640s, England experienced an upswing in millennial sentiments as evidenced by the rapid development of numerous millennial movements. The combination of the English Civil War, the execution of Charles I, and the resulting political upheaval contributed to the swell of millennial movements between 1640 and the restoration of Charles II in 1660. Though prophecies of impending apocalypse did not come to pass many of the movements persisted into the following century. It was in this context that the IHD had its genesis.

Joanna Southcott was born in 1750 in Devonshire, England. She worked as a maid in the home of a prosperous family when, in 1780, she began to have visions of the end of the world. Southcott wrote about her visions and the beliefs she derived from them along with accounts about her daily life as a maid in the hope of bringing her beliefs to the attention of the established Church of England. Like many later millennial prophets, it is through her writings that she gained widespread attention, both during and after her lifetime.

In 1792, Joanna began lobbying the Church in earnest to examine her prophecies and visions. When she received scant positive feedback from the church fathers, she
began to publish her prophecies under the title *The Strange Effects of Faith*, a six-part tract that was released in 1801. It was in this writing that the core of her theology began to take shape. Her theology centers on an interpretation of Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise its heel.”

Southcott interpreted this passage as a prophecy by God that someday a daughter of Eve would fight and defeat Satan, thereby redeeming all women from the stigma attached to their gender by dint of the legacy of Eve’s sin in tempting Adam with the fruit of knowledge. In 1802 she began to move to “seal” her followers, basing this on passages from Revelations 7 that make reference to the marking of the chosen people with a seal before the rapture (the time when the righteous will be taken up to heaven before the world ends). These passages state that the chosen will number 144,000, a figure that would play an important role in the future IHD. Southcott began to travel around England “sealing” believers with small, message-bearing pieces of paper. By 1807, she had sealed 14,000 of her followers. In 1813, at the age of 63, she announced that she was going to give virgin birth to the Shiloh, or second coming of the Messiah, who would usher in a new age of peace for the sealed. When Southcott died in 1814 without having given birth, the failure of Shiloh to materialize was rationalized away in several ways, and the movement progressed.

Over the next 60 years, the movement Southcott began was led by a succession of figures. One of Southcott’s prophecies made reference to “The Seven Messengers,” with her the vanguard of a succession of prophets leading up to the “Ingathering.” The
Ingathering refers to the gathering of the 144,000 elect (chosen people) who would live for 1,000 years in an earthly paradise before the end of the world\(^3\). These seven prophets were, in order:

1. Joanna Southcott (founder of the movement)
2. Richard Brothers
3. George Turner
4. William Shaw
5. John Wroe (founder of the Wroeite church)
6. James Jezreel (founder of the Jezreelite church)

As the mantle passed from messenger to messenger, each added his own stamp to the movement, expanding on various facets and inserting his own teachings and prophecies. They worked to spread the message of the movement by traveling around the world and winning converts, most notably in Australia, America, and Canada. The most influential of these subsequent prophets prior to the creation of the IHD was James Jezreel. He was the first messenger to expand on the notion of the Ingathering. Jezreel wrote in his magnum opus, *The Flying Roll*, that the children of the ten lost tribes of Israel would make up the 144,000 people that had to be provided for at the ingathering, where they would “redeem their immortality.” Much of the IHD’s theological foundations can be traced to Jezreel’s writings that were in turn influenced by the earlier prophets. Jezreel was also the first messenger to make the movement truly “Anglo-American,” by establishing colonies in the United States; most notably in the town of
Fowlerville, Michigan and in the city of Detroit. It is at this point that Benjamin Purnell, later to be hailed as the “seventh messenger,” began his rise to prominence.

**Nomenclature**

In order to understand the organization founded by Benjamin Purnell, a few terms must be first explained. In the broadest sense, the people who joined the IHD were Israelites, because they considered themselves to be descendents of the ten lost tribes of Israel. While most groups identifying themselves as Israelites also identify themselves as Jewish, Benjamin and his followers are Christian Israelites; they consider themselves to be descendents of the lost tribes of Israel who accepted Jesus Christ. Since Benjamin accepted the authenticity of the previous six messengers, it can be said that he founded a sect in the Southcottian, Wroeite, and Jezreelite tradition. The official name of Benjamin’s sect was The Israelite House of David, the name David being used in deference to the Israelite origins of the group. The colony split in 1930 after a prolonged battle for leadership between H.T. Dewhurst, a prominent colony member, and Mary Purnell, Benjamin’s wife and the co-founder of the IHD. The split followed Benjamin’s death. Dewhurst’s faction legally maintained the right to both the name “The Israelite House of David” and “The House of David.” Mary’s faction maintained the right to the name “The Israelite House of David as Reorganized by Mary Purnell.” In reality, Mary’s faction was to adopt the name “Mary’s City of David” or just “The City of David.” In this thesis I will use “IHD” to refer to the Israelite House of David under Benjamin
before the split. I will use House of David, or H.T. Dewhurst’s faction and City of David, or Mary’s faction, to differentiate between the two groups after the split. In some cases, I will use the term Israelites to refer to all members of the Seventh Church\(^5\) and in some cases I will use the term “colony members” to refer to all of the members of the Seventh Church residing at the IHD, the House of David, or the City of David.

**Brother Benjamin and Sister Mary**

Little is known about the early life of Benjamin or of his wife Mary. After they established the IHD, they rarely spoke about their origins, perhaps following the example of Jesus, about whose early life little is known. The established facts are that Benjamin was born in Fleming county Kentucky in 1861, the seventh son in the family and the youngest of twelve children. His parents were farmers, and when he was six his mother died, resulting in him being sent to live with his older brother and his wife, who were also farmers. His sister-in-law, Elizabeth, stated in interviews that Benjamin was religiously active from a young age, and that he used to preach as a child, often to trees if people were not available. Benjamin himself wrote about his calling to preach at a young age, claiming to have taught himself to read from the New Testament.

Benjamin was married at the age of 16 to Angeline Brown, a 19 year-old-farmer’s daughter. They had a daughter, Sarah, but the marriage ended after two years, much of which Benjamin spent on the road away from his family. In 1880, soon after his divorce from Angeline, Benjamin met Mary Stallard, another farmer’s daughter and the two were
married on August 3 of that year. Over the next seven years, they constantly moved around the Midwest, spreading the gospel. It was not until the birth of their son Coy, and then their daughter Hettie, that the family chose to stop traveling. They settled in Richmond, Indiana, where Benjamin found a job at a broom factory. While they were living in Richmond, they became involved in the Jezreelite church, after Benjamin read excerpts from *The Flying Roll*. He and Mary both became ministers for the Jezreelite church and it was at this time that Benjamin and Mary began to formulate the structure of the beliefs that would underpin their subsequent ministry. During this period, Benjamin adopted the creed of the Jezreelite church and began to live in the pattern of Christ by letting his hair and his beard grow long.

The Purnell family left Richmond in 1892 to move to Detroit to join Michael Mills’ Jezreelite community. Mills had already proclaimed himself to be the seventh messenger, and his colony shared some characteristics with the later IHD colony, namely the wearing of long hair and beards by the men and communal living. Soon after the Purnells’ arrival, Mills was sentenced to five years in Jackson State Prison for adultery and statutory rape. Though the Purnells never had much contact with Mills personally, they became traveling ministers for his church. It was during this time that Benjamin had a revelation that would lead to the creation of the IHD. He later explained that “He had received the spirit of God (Shiloh) just as Jesus had received the spirit of God (Christ)” (Adkin 1990:24). He believed that this made him the “Son of Man” and it was at this time that he came to see himself as the true seventh messenger. This belief caused a rift between the Purnells and the other members of the Church, and in 1895, the Purnells left
the Church to minister on their own. After a period of itinerant preaching they settled in Fostoria, Ohio, where, in 1902, Benjamin finished his first book, *The Star of Bethlehem: The Living Roll of Life*. The distribution of this book, along with other pamphlets, drew people to Benjamin’s message. It was in Fostoria that the IHD was officially born.

The move of the fledgling colony from Fostoria coincided with a personal tragedy in the Purnell family. The Purnell’s daughter Hettie was killed in an explosion in February of 1903 on her first day of work at a local factory. The Purnells, following the teachings of Matthew (“Let the dead bury the dead”), did not attend the body identification or the funeral. This move shocked the town’s people, and was interpreted as a sign that the Purnells did not grieve for the death of their daughter. The rush of bad feelings and discrimination that the Israelites encountered as a result was a sad note accompanying the move of the Purnells and a group of their key converts to their new home in Michigan.

Benton Harbor, Michigan was an ideal setting for the fledgling Israelite community. It was close to Grand Rapids, a hub for the dissemination of Jezreelite literature, and there were several Jezreelites already living in the area who could help get them established. Economically, the Benton Harbor area was growing by leaps and bounds, thanks to the tourist industry and a climate that made it an ideal place for fruit farming. To give it the final seal of approval, James Jezreel had prophesized that “Out of thee (Michigan) shall come a star.” With the first colony building under construction in Benton Harbor, Benjamin and Mary left for Australia, to collect members from the Wroeite Church (people following the teachings of James Wroe, the fifth messenger; also
known as the “Fifth Church”) for the Ingathering. They came back to Benton Harbor in 1905, bringing 85 converts from the Wroeite church. New members flooded into the fledgling colony so fast that even with several new buildings being constructed there was a danger of the community being swamped. Benjamin included a paragraph in Shiloh’s Messenger of Wisdom (the monthly newsletter published by the IHD) advising potential converts to please correspond and then wait to be called before packing up and coming to the IHD to prevent overcrowding. With his Seventh House firmly established, Benjamin could now dedicate himself to the task of organizing, housing, and supporting the quickly expanding colony.

The Israelite colony’s first decade in Benton Harbor was a period of excitement, challenge, growth, and expansion. It soon became evident that Benjamin was not only a spiritual leader but also a canny businessman, a master organizer, and an astute judge of character. As a millennial movement that expected to be host to 144,000 elect in the very near future the early emphasis was on establishing an infrastructure able to support the Ingathering.

The Trial and the Split

Despite its successes, the colony faced challenges. Almost from its inception, the IHD was dogged by accusations leveled against both Benjamin and the colony itself. These accusations were generally of two kinds. Some members, after a period of living the Israelite lifestyle, decided that it was not for them. On deciding to leave the colony,
they attempted to recover the money and/or property that they had donated. Because of the millennial nature of the group and the level of commitment people made by joining, no formal arrangements had ever been made for this eventuality. Even though the first few of these unsatisfied former colony members to leave the colony were fully or mostly compensated for their initial investment, many of them continued to criticize the IHD. One even published a pamphlet calling for the IHD to be disbanded and Benjamin and Mary deported. Accompanying these problems were accusations of “immorality” against Benjamin, mostly alleging that he used his power and authority to engage in sexual intercourse with various women and girls in the colony. The fact that all of the claims came from dissatisfied former colony members who provided little supporting evidence went largely unnoticed in the court of public opinion. Those who remained in the IHD referred to those who left the colony in this way as “scorpions.”

There were two factors that led to the sensational vilification of the IHD, and of Benjamin in particular. The first involves a fundamental characteristic of the Israelites: their appearance, beliefs, and lifestyle were all very different from those practiced by the other residents of the area. The IHD was well aware of this fact and went to great lengths to fit in. Members worked to improve the economy, maintained excellent business relationships with the rest of the community, and provided recreation and entertainment (often free of charge). Since many of the colony members were foreigners (Englishmen and Australians were quite exotic for that time and place), they made a special effort to be patriotic. They marched in parades and built floats, had a rock garden replica of the battleship Maine built in the IHD owned and operated amusement
park, and always flew the American flag in prominent places. During WWI, over thirty Israelite men were drafted and served in non-combatant roles in the army (Adkin 1990:175). Through these efforts the IHD managed to endear itself to the people of the area and eventually became an accepted part of the community. For the previously mentioned reasons, however, the IHD would always stand out as a group.

The second factor was the state of the press during this period in American history. In the early 1900s, America was in the grip of circulation wars and sensationalist journalism. Facts were of secondary importance; the only goal of the reporters was to draw in readers with ever more fantastic stories, and what could be a more titillating story than one of a strange religious cult where the members were kept in virtual slavery while the leader lived in luxury and engaged in kinky sexual practices with his “harem”? The press fed on it, continuously upping the ante to keep readers hooked (Adkin 1990:149).

It may be that this period of accusations was the product of a positive feedback loop. A feedback loop is a way in which some natural and human social systems organize themselves. It occurs when the inputs to a system become linked to the system’s outputs. Feedback loops can be negative (which keep the system in equilibrium) or positive (which force the system out of equilibrium). As an example of a negative feedback loop, consider a bus company that would earn $1000 regardless of whether it attracted 1,000 passengers at a lower price of $1 per fare or only 500 passengers at the higher price $2 per fare; the input (fare price) impacts the output (number of passengers), but does not alter on total earnings (equilibrium). Negative
feedback loops are thus self-stabilizing. This stability allows a negative feedback loop to continue operating indefinitely or at least until an exogenous force disrupts it.

Conversely, the global greenhouse effect is an example of a positive feedback system. Emissions from burning fossil fuels cause the temperature of the planet to rise. Higher temperatures causes people to burn more fuel running air conditioners and refrigerators. The emissions caused by this increase in fuel burning causes the temperature of the planet to rise even further. Because the input and the output are positively correlated, the system is pushed out of equilibrium. Because of this instability, a positive feedback loop will generally rise to a point of peak intensity, at which some variable in the system collapses and then tapers off (e.g., if the greenhouse effect feedback loop were left unchecked, eventually the temperature of the earth would rise to the point where humans could no longer survive, they would all die and stop producing emissions, and, given no other interference, the earth would eventually cool). The two requirements for a feedback loop to come into being are (1) that the system must be closed (a single bus company; the planet Earth) and (2) there must be some mechanism by which information is distributed throughout the system (word of mouth in earlier times, the press in more modern times).

Some theorize that positive feedback loops have been responsible for some of the most famous accusation crazes in history (Shermer 1997:100). The various witch persecutions in Europe and the New World in the 1500s and 1600s, the communist scare of the 1950s, the “Satanic Panic” in the United States and the United Kingdom in the 1980s, and the recovered memory movement in the 1990s are all possibly the result of
positive feedback loops. An accusation feedback loop operates in the following manner: some individual or group who feels downtrodden or disenfranchised makes an accusation. This accusation often involves a sexual component and is generally made against an individual or group who are perceived as “different.” Once accused, it is very difficult to refute the charges in the court of popular opinion. Any response, be it a declaration of innocence or mere silence, is construed as further proof of guilt. At this point, some mechanism begins to circulate the information around the system, and other accusers appear who are either highly suggestible or feel that they have something to gain by accusing. The feedback loop reaches the breaking point when the accusations become so ludicrous or widespread as to strain credulity. For example, at the height of the recovered memory movement, estimates of the psychologists heading the movement suggested that more than 100 million Americans, or 38% of the American population, were involved in sexual abuse as either victims or abusers (Bass and Davis 1988, Shermer 1997:107). Similarly, at the height of the Satanic Panic it was estimated that if all the reports of ritual abuse were accurate, then there would have to be thousands of satanic cults operating in the United States killing, mutilating and abusing tens of thousands of animals and children every year (Shermer 1997:106). Once the claims become too fantastic to be plausible, people take a critical look at the basis for these claims, and consequently dismiss or downplay them. Thus, witch-hunts, communist scare, satanic panic, and the recovered memory movement were found to have been based on false premises spurred on by overzealous clergy, politicians, law enforcement officials, and psychologists, respectively.
It may be that this type of feedback loop was in operation with regard to the accusations of sexual misconduct at IHD. The accusers were all people who had left the colony and bore a grudge against Benjamin. After the initial charge, the number of accusations multiplied, even though only circumstantial evidence was ever offered. Benjamin’s detractors took his denials as further evidence of his guilt. The sensationalist press acted as the mechanism by which the information was spread throughout the community. As the feedback loop grew in intensity, the claims became fantastical and improbable. Among other things, Benjamin was accused of keeping a “Harem Shack” on High Island\(^8\) where he would go to enjoy the company of up to seven women at once (Adkin 1990:150). Since there is no evidence that Benjamin ever went to High Island after an initial visit in 1912 before the IHD had any operations there, this charge seems highly improbable. In 1927 Benjamin was accused of forcible rape, although at the time he was dying of tuberculosis and was barely able to walk.

It is true that some of these things could be explained in other ways, e.g., that all of the accusers were ex-members could be explained by the fact that current members would hardly be in a position or have the motivation to accuse the leader, and the lack of evidence could have been explained by the complicity of all of the colony members. However, it is more probable that an accusation feedback loop was in effect as opposed to accepting that hundreds of members of a celibate religious group were all complicit in the sexual abuse of a large number of girls over at least a ten-to-fifteen year period. This conclusion is bolstered by the fact that all of the alleged victims happened to be disgruntled ex-members, many of whom were pursuing civil actions to recover money
deeded to the IHD at the same time that they were pursuing criminal actions (Adkin 1990:157).

Benjamin was tried on a variety of charges including rape, immorality, and fraud. The trials became hugely sensational in Southwest Michigan, and the presiding judge had to be brought in from a distant jurisdiction within Michigan in order to ensure judicial impartiality (Adkin 1990:155). The trial lasted from May 16 to August 17, 1927, with the verdict not being handed down until November 10, 1927 (Adkin 1990:163). In the end, Benjamin was never convicted of any sexual misconduct. He was, however, convicted of religious fraud, and he and Mary were ordered by law to leave the colony and sever all ties with the IHD. The ban was never applied to Benjamin, who died on December 16, 1927 of complications related to his tuberculosis.

After Benjamin’s death, the simmering hostilities between Mary and Dewhurst erupted into open conflict. Dewhurst, a judge from California, had joined the colony in 1920. Benjamin admired him, and soon he began to make his way up through the ranks of the IHD. His first big clash with Mary came when, in his new role as colony secretary (he replaced Francis Thorpe, one of Mary’s most ardent supporters), he stripped Mary of her financial control over the colony by rewriting the by-laws after Benjamin’s death (Adkin 1990:199). During the 1927 trial of Benjamin, some of his notes, seized during a raid of the colony, were entered into evidence. Like much of Benjamin’s writing, these notes were difficult to follow and open to varying interpretations. One interpretation was that they were evidence of problems between Benjamin and Mary. Dewhurst’s faction focused on this, claiming that the notes provided evidence that Benjamin had lost his
faith in Mary and would not have wanted her to carry on his work. During the early years of the colony, it had come to be accepted that instead of Benjamin being the sole seventh messenger, Benjamin and Mary together were the seventh messenger, Shiloh Twain, a savior composed of male female halves. Dewhurst’s faction proclaimed that Mary was not in fact a messenger, and that Benjamin alone was the seventh messenger. Mary’s followers maintained that Mary was part of the seventh messenger, and that the Dewhurst followers were “scorpions” who had lost the faith (Adkin 1990:199-203).

The rift grew and, in February of 1930, led to a split of the Israelite colony after several draw-out court battles (Adkin 1990:201). Both groups went on to later success. In the sections below discussing the various uses of popular culture in their proselytizing practices, examples from both the House of David (Dewhurst) and the City of David (Mary) will be used. Both the House of David and the City of David exist to this day, though their numbers have dwindled to only a handful of members. Although the glory days of the colony are past, the few remaining faithful carry on, still living communally as in times past. *Shiloh’s Messenger of Wisdom* is still published, and some of the original buildings are still in use. Two small museums, one on the colony grounds, are open and staffed by volunteers from the colonies and from the general public. Colony members still hold dinners to celebrate the holidays and other special occasions. Though they are greatly reduced in numbers the remaining members are not disheartened, according to Ron Taylor. A passage from their scripture claims that the Ingathering will only occur when the number of the House of David have been reduced to almost nothing,
and the Israelites take their dwindling membership as a sign that the final days are not far away.

The Fundamentals of the House of David’s Theology

The theology of the IHD is principally laid out in *The Star of Bethlehem: The Living Roll of Life*. There are many passages in *The Star* that refer directly to passages in *The Flying Roll*, the book in which Jezreel’s teachings are collected. This constant reference to other works was not done thoughtlessly, however. One of the reasons that Benjamin was so successful at getting converts from the previous Southcottian Churches to join his group was the masterful way in which he wove together the teachings of the previous messengers while incorporating his own message and making them all seem to support of one another. It is on the strength of the message in *The Star* that many Wroeites and Jezreelites traveled from as far away as England and Australia to join the IHD. In 1906, two of the IHD buildings, Bethlehem and Jerusalem, were joined together by a triple arch with a walkway on top. This was done to signify the joining of the Fifth Church (Wroeites) and the Sixth Church (Jezreelites) to form the Seventh Church, The House of David (Adkin 1990:75).

The central focus of the IHD theology is the “life of the body,” the idea that not only will the righteous be favored at the apocalypse, but that they will live on forever in their human bodies. Benjamin identified four stages that the elect would have to pass through in order to gain this eternal life. The first stage was the natural condition of all
men, that of the original sin that is the legacy of the expulsion from Eden. The second stage could be reached by accepting the various messages and prophecies of the previous messengers as being divinely inspired. The third level was reached by the acceptance of the “branch” (this is a reference to Benjamin’s characterization of himself as “A man branch, grafted onto the vine of God” after his revelation). It is during this third stage that the elect underwent a process of “cleansing, and the purification of the blood.” This process was the result of the lifestyle practiced by the members of the IHD. Most of the rules that governed life in the colony were taken from Benjamin’s interpretations of various scriptures. These rules included communal living and the transferring of personal property to the colony, eating no meat and drinking no alcohol, wearing long hair and beards, and sexual abstinence. Members believed that following these rules helped them realize the Israelite creed of living as Jesus did. They practiced communal living like Jesus and the apostles and did not cut their hair because they believed that Jesus had long hair and a beard. They observed dietary rules because, as a Jew, Jesus would have followed a kosher diet. They abstained from sex in deference to Christ’s supposedly celibate lifestyle. These lifestyle standards are examples of how Benjamin appealed to other Israelite groups by incorporating their beliefs into his theology.

The fourth stage of personal development was to take place at the millennium. After the apocalypse, the chosen would spend 40 days on earth, modeled on the 40 days spent on earth by Christ after his resurrection. At the end of this final trial, the righteous would be taken up into heaven in their physical bodies. These four stages were not often discussed in the everyday life of the colony. Perhaps because Benjamin saw that it could
be used as a means of ranking people within a group that was supposed to be egalitarian, he kept the focus of the colony on the proper way of living, not on the attainment of the stages.

Benjamin later expanded on his original work. In 1912 he published the 700-page *The Book of Wisdom: the Flying Roll*, and his last work, *Balls of Fire*, was left unfinished at 700 pages when it was published after his death. Benjamin had a great appreciation of the printed word, and he understood the power of the written word to legitimize his message (Adkin 1990:15). He had learned from the failure of Michael Mills (who did not commit his message to paper) the importance of this, and he followed the earlier examples of Southcott, Wroe, and Jezreel, each of whom produced many volumes of work (Adkin 1990:15). When The Ark (the first building erected at the new Benton Harbor colony) was completed, a printing press was immediately installed. It was here that the first copies of *The Star* and of Benjamin’s later writings were published, as well as *Shiloh’s Messenger of Wisdom*, tracts to be used by the missionary teams, and various poems, plays, and sermons written by Benjamin (Adkin 1990:16). By creating this large volume of written work Benjamin was creating a foundation for the IHD to build upon in the future.

It was during the early days of the colony in Benton Harbor that Benjamin instituted another means of getting his message to the public. After his return from Australia in 1905, Benjamin had too many responsibilities in the budding colony to travel around preaching himself, so he delegated this job to other colony members who showed an aptitude for it. Benjamin would often hold meetings with the colony children during
which they would be required to discuss and give their personal interpretations of various scriptures. Those who excelled at that kind of speaking were often selected to be missionaries. Within a year as many as fourteen teams of missionaries would be out traveling at any one time. Though they generally worked in the United States, they were sometimes sent as far afield as Europe and Australia. News of their progress was regularly printed in *Shiloh’s Messenger of Wisdom* (Adkin 1990:20).

One of the tenets of the IHD theology that stands out from more orthodox Christian sects is its inclusion of females in divine roles. Joanna Southcott, the first messenger, claimed that a female descendent of Eve would be the one to finally defeat Satan and redeem all women. She felt herself to be that descendent and proclaimed herself to be “The Bride of the Lamb (Christ),” the one who would defeat Satan and allow for the beginning of the New Kingdom (Matthews 1936:59). This idea of Christ having a female counterpart was embraced by the IHD, who considered Benjamin and Mary to constitute between them the Seventh Messenger (Shiloh Twain). This belief was expressed by Benjamin in a passage from *The Star*: “Benjamin was brought forth twain—male and female created He them” (1902:19). The IHD believes that the new trinity will consist of Benjamin, Mary, and “The Bride.” The Bride is the consort of Christ, and it is her coming (the second coming) that will usher in the creation of the New Kingdom (the same as in Joanna Southcott’s theology) (Taylor 2007). Ron Taylor, the current manager of Mary’s City of David, when speaking to the author, used a parable of Benjamin’s to describe how the role of the Bride, the ingathering, and the purity of the elect were all related. He said,
The purity of the Israelites is like a piece of silver lost in a dark house. The Bride must search all around the house to find the piece of silver. When she finally does, she is so happy that she calls all of the neighbors over to rejoice with her (Taylor 2007).

In this scenario it is made clear that only when the Israelites achieve purity will the Bride “find them” and that the Ingathering (calling all the neighbors over) can only occur after this purity is found.

**Benjamin the Organizer**

From the earliest days of the colony, Benjamin had a natural talent for organizing people for the best results. He took a personal interest in the talents and skills displayed by colony members and always sought to put these skills to their most efficient use. While many of the people who joined the colony were already adept at some trade or possessed some other useful abilities, many of them only discovered and developed their talents under Benjamin’s tutelage. One of the factors that set the IHD apart from many other communal religious groups was the encouragement given to members to develop their own individual identities and capacities. Many charismatic leaders, as a way to maintain authority over their followers, require that they be acknowledged as being the most talented member of the group in all areas. This was not true of Benjamin, who was comfortable with certain of his followers’ abilities eclipsing his own. As a man with a wide variety of interests, he did not scorn any field in which his followers might show aptitude. He encouraged all talents, not only for the good of the colony, but also because
he understood that the freedom to be creative and to pursue excellence in their areas of expertise was essential to his followers’ happiness. Thus, artists were given the means to produce art, musicians and athletes were encouraged to practice their instruments and sports, and some people were even sent to study particular fields at universities (Adkin 1990:40). This encouragement was not limited to the male colony members. Benjamin did not discriminate based on gender; when he saw talent in a girl or woman he gave her the same kind of encouragement as he gave to the male members. Over the life of the colony many women were sent to college to study various subjects. Several even earned law degrees. Decades before well-known female baseball teams were formed during WWII, the IHD had a girl’s baseball team, and during the 1930s the famous female athlete Mildred Didrikson toured with the IHD men’s baseball team.

During the decade from 1905 to 1915, the IHD was continually expanding, both in terms of membership and variety of enterprises. Benjamin bought more land, not only for housing uses, but to support various business ventures, from fruit farms to an amusement park. He had a talent for making his investments and business ventures serve multiple purposes. The farms, processing plants and cold storage facility that he built produced food for the colony, produced revenue when the excess was sold, and provided insurance for the future, when vast amounts of food would be needed to feed the 144,000 people of the Ingathering (Adkin 1990:27). The amusement park not only produced revenue but also helped to endear the IHD to the community, provided a venue for the IHD to spread its message, and allowed for curiosity seekers to interact with the colony members without invading the latter’s privacy (Adkin 1990:23). In 1912, the IHD
acquired the logging rights to High Island, a small island in Lake Michigan, where it built a lumber camp and sawmill and began a successful logging operation. Benjamin saw the lumber camp as an opportunity to meet multiple objectives: to provide lumber for the expansion of the colony; to make a profit by selling lumber to the quickly-growing community of Southwest Michigan and to other markets bordering Lake Michigan; and to put the skills of the colony members experienced in the logging trade to good use (Adkin 1990:26). One episode, remembered by colony member Tom Dewhurst (son of H.T. Dewhurst), characterizes Benjamin’s business savvy. Shortly after WWI, several young men from the IHD were denied jobs working for the streetcar company in Benton Harbor because of their long hair and beards. Instead of challenging the owners of the company, which could have caused bad feelings towards the colony, Benjamin simply bought enough stock in the company to gain control of it. He then put members of the IHD to work running it (Adkin 1990:30).

Mary, who ran the colony’s business office, also supported Benjamin’s entrepreneurial endeavors. She and her staff handled bill payments, the collection of accounts, and the distribution of resources within the colony. They also managed correspondence with prospective members, colony ministers, and the traveling IHD bands and sports teams, while also publishing *Shiloh's Messenger of Wisdom*, and assigning various jobs to members. Together, the Purnells cultivated good relationships as responsible and productive partners with area business people. It was during this time of rapid expansion that we see the start of what was to become one of the hallmarks of
the IHD: their unapologetic use of popular culture as a medium by which to spread their religious message.

**The IHD’s Use of Pop Culture in Proselytizing**

As mentioned previously, proselytizing was an important part of IHD culture. Benjamin and Mary got their start as itinerant preachers, and after they established the colony in 1903, they continued to send out teams of colony members to preach and encourage conversion. They also made extensive use of the printed word as a medium for proselytization and equipped their missionaries with pamphlets explaining the IHD’s theology and philosophy. By far the most successful means they found for spreading the message of the group was by pairing it with various forms of popular culture entertainment. This type of activity served a double purpose: it served as a vehicle to get the Israelites’ message out, and it also generated income for the colony. There were three major categories of popular culture entertainment: bands and music groups, tourism, and sports teams.

**The Music of the House of David**

Music was the earliest type of popular culture used by the IHD. In fact, the music predated the founding of the Benton Harbor colony and can be traced back over two hundred years, from Joanna Southcott who employed bands to play at her religious events through the churches of Wroe and Jezreel who incorporated member orchestras into their
church services and to the early days of Benjamin and Mary’s itinerant preaching. Music was always a part of the IHD itinerant preacher’s repertoire and a standard feature of early IHD evangelism.

During the earliest days of the colony, religious meetings were held five times a week, and they always included music as an accompaniment to the preaching. Soon, three public meetings a week were added to the line-up, and they became well attended as word spread of both the musical entertainment and the entertaining style of Benjamin’s preaching. Benjamin’s wit while preaching became well known, and, on the rare occasion when he was heckled by anyone in the crowd, he turned the insult back on the insulter (Adkin 1990:32).

By 1905, the music of the IHD had evolved from informal groups that performed as part of the public prayer meetings to organized instrumental and vocal groups that performed at the colony, in the local region, and on the national stage (Adkin 1990:350). Part of the impetus for the development of these bands was the arrival of several accomplished musicians with the Wroeite group who came from Australia in 1905. This group included not only instrumentalists and vocalists, but instrument makers, composers, and conductors as well. Two of the prominent families in this group had owned large music stores and music academies in Australia. Under the guidance of these individuals, the original music groups proliferated into a home band, a traveling band, vocal groups, and various smaller ensembles. This musical odyssey culminated in famous marching and jazz bands that regularly toured the nation and abroad (Adkin 1990:26).
One of the most interesting aspects of the IHD bands was their dynamism. Since they were working to keep up with pop culture trends, it was necessary for them to constantly revamp their musical offerings. In the early days of the colony, marching bands were very popular, and the first bands that the IHD sent out on the road were marching bands. John Philip Sousa, the famous composer and band conductor, even served as a guest conductor on occasion (Adkin 1990:199), and he is supposed to have offered Clarence “Chic” Bell, the famous IHD maestro and coronet player, first chair coronet in his orchestra. In the 1920s, jazz became all the rage, and the IHD created a jazz ensemble that was very popular. The dynamism of the bands speaks to both the non-judgmental attitude of the IHD members toward non-Israelite culture and to their willingness to embrace change in order to win converts and economic rewards.

After Benjamin’s death and the division of the colony, Mary, forsaking the show business orientation of the old colony, made sure that music at the City of David was again used for personal entertainment and worship. With the loss of many of its best musicians who either went with Mary or left the sect completely, the bands at the House of David began to rely more on non-member musicians and were used primarily to provide entertainment at Eden Springs Park, the amusement park operated by the IHD and at the Grand Vista, a nightclub that the IHD operated on the shore of Lake Michigan (Adkin 1990:214).
IHD Involvement in the Tourism Industry

Though music was the first way that Benjamin incorporated popular culture into the colony’s proselytizing, the various ways in which the IHD became involved in the tourism industry were certainly the most all-encompassing. The first real foray of the IHD into tourism came with the construction of the Eden Springs amusement park in 1908 (Adkin 1990:23). The park was built away from the main IHD buildings (to discourage tourists from simply walking into Peoples living quarters) on land that had recently been purchased from the Eastman Springs Company (Adkin 1990:24). Since the colony already had an aviary, animal exhibits, and an ice cream parlor near the Bethlehem and Jerusalem buildings, these attractions were moved and expanded on when the amusement park was built. By the summer of 1908 the park was open for business, featuring a zoo, arcade, ice cream parlor, picnic grounds, a small lake and swimming beach, photography studio, souvenir stands, a restaurant/hotel, tourist cabins, a dance hall, a bowling alley, an auditorium, miniature steam trains, and free musical entertainment (Adkin 1990:24). Over the years, new attractions were added. Soon after the original completion of the park, at least seven more miniature trains were added, both as an attraction as well as a means of transportation. These miniature trains became an important link in a people-moving system that began with the steamships at the docks of major cities around Lake Michigan. Docking steam ships delivered tourists to the IHD-controlled Twin Cities Trolley System in Benton Harbor, which in turn delivered them to the Eden Springs Park miniature railroad train station for the trip into and around the park
The zoo, aviary, and picnic area were also expanded on. The biggest expansions, however, were yet to come. In the 1930 split, The House of David acquired the Eastman Springs property. After the IHD stabilized, it began a new period of economic growth. In 1931, H.T. Dewhurst began plans for a major renovation and remodeling of the park. The original park auditorium was torn down and replaced with a huge amphitheater complex that included a large dance floor and stage. The bathing lake was filled in, a larger bowling alley and arcade were constructed, and new attractions, such as a miniature auto racetrack (the forerunner of the modern go-kart track) were constructed. The Grand Vista tourist complex just south of St. Joseph, Michigan was built on the shore of Lake Michigan (Adkin 1990:227). In downtown Benton Harbor the House of David built a huge cold storage plant on the border of the largest agricultural wholesale market in the Midwest. Meanwhile, the City of David was working on the almost-completed four-story hotel in downtown Benton Harbor that it had been awarded in the split.

All of these new additions would be prominently featured in the House of David booth maintained by the Israelites at the 1933-34 World’s Fair in Chicago. This booth sold arts and crafts made in the House of David workshops, provided information on both the Israelite faith and the attractions at Eden Springs, and even sold trolley tickets from the Benton Harbor docks to the park. It is a mark of where H.T. Dewhurst’s main focus was that, when the House of David was originally assigned a booth in the section of the fair for religious exhibits, he insisted that their booth be moved to the commercial section (Adkin 1990:228).
All of the improvements to the park were celebrated at the grand opening of the new House of David amphitheater and concert hall. The celebration was held on the 4th of July in 1933 (a nod to the patriotism that the IHD had always encouraged) with world-famous opera singer Ernestine Schuman-Heink performing to a packed house at a free concert. The additions were also celebrated later in the summer by allowing all of the children of Berrien County free admission and use of the park for one day. This gesture may have been one of the first to lead the way to the reconciling of the local community and the House of David, as well as acting as a first-rate advertisement for the park and an enticement for future visits (even back then the House of David understood the power of children to influence the spending habits of the family) (Adkin 1990:228).

In 1922, the IHD had begun construction on a hotel that was planned as the largest hotel in West Michigan. Soon after construction began, some wealthy local businessmen tried to out-do the Israelites by building a larger hotel. In their haste to get it built, the concrete composing the upper floors of the building was not set properly in the winter of 1923-24, leading to the collapse of these floors in the heat of the next summer, to the amusement of the Israelites, many of whom had been heckled during the construction of their hotel on account of their long hair and beards (Adkin 1990:36). Though construction of the hotel was stalled during Benjamin’s trial and the division of the colony following his death, it was eventually finished by Mary’s colony, to whom it had been awarded when the original colony split. Mary’s Hotel, as it was called, was a very successful venture for the City of David. It boasted ninety rooms, a popular vegetarian restaurant, a bakery, and several other businesses run by local people who
rented the space from the City of David. The hotel became a landmark in Benton Harbor and was operated by the City of David until 1975, when it was traded for other land in Berrien County (Adkin 1990:254).

In addition to the hotel, the City of David became further involved in the tourist industry by starting a small resort called Paradise Park soon after the split. Built on land near Mary’s Shiloh, the new headquarters of the City of David, the resort started out with five cabins that were mostly rented to vacationing families (Adkin 1990:253). The City of David later acquired additional land from the old Eastman Springs Company and expanded the resort. Following Benjamin’s example on how to make multi-purpose investments, Mary had the new cabins constructed to serve as seasonal tourist housing for the immediate future and to house the elect at the time of the Ingathering. In a conversation with the author Ron Taylor of the City of David stated that the cabins (which are still rented out by the City of David as non-seasonal low-income housing) were spaced closely together because Mary wanted to make the best use of the available land. She reasoned that the tourists who rented the cabins in the summer were usually extended families and groups of friends vacationing at the same time, and so would not mind being close to each other. When the cabins were used as housing for the Ingathering the closely packed cabins would be the optimal arrangement for a large group of people living communally (Taylor 2007). Today most of the tourist cabins constructed by the IHD are still standing, and some are still in use.

Paradise Park never rivaled the size and complexity of the House of David’s Eden Springs, and generally maintained a lower profile. Mary, having in the past made
statements about the “ritzy” acts booked into Eden Springs and the “vulgar” antics of Chic Bell, the House of David’s bandleader and Master of Ceremonies, could not afford to emulate them (Adkin 1990:250).

Interestingly, both of the Israelite-run resorts and Mary’s hotel became very popular with Jewish tourists, mostly from the Chicago area. This was due in part to the resorts being founded in a traditionally Jewish resort enclave, in part to the Jewish-like trappings of the Christian Israelites and in part to the welcoming attitude of the colony members who welcomed Jews as brothers in an era when they were often discriminated against in America.

When Eden Springs first opened in 1908 a large portion of the patrons at the first vegetarian restaurant were from the nearby Jewish resorts that pre-dated Eden Springs. From 1930 through the 1950s the number of Jews patronizing the Israelite tourist facilities steadily increased. They stayed in both the hotels and the cabins at the resorts, and ate most of their meals in the vegetarian and kosher restaurants at the resorts. These restaurants were also popular with the large population of Seventh-Day Adventists in Southwest Michigan (Adkin 1990:255). Mary, in particular, was very appreciative of her Jewish customers and regularly booked Jewish entertainers who performed at the auditorium that Mary had built as a place to preach. In 1938 she even had a synagogue built for the convenience of the Jewish tourists. For a short time a hospital serving kosher food operated on the grounds of the City of David, serving the area’s Jewish community (Adkin 1990:256).
The Sports Teams

While the bands sprang from the IHD’s past, and the tourist business provided both financing and infrastructure for the future Ingathering, sports teams are what the IHD is best remembered for today. The baseball teams in particular became so popular that by the 1930s there were as many as four official IHD teams on the road at a time, as well as a number of fraudulent teams billing themselves as “The Original House of David Baseball Team,” who had no ties to the colony (Hawkins and Bertolino 2000:47).

When the IHD colony was created in 1903, baseball was the national pastime and it was not surprising that the boys and young men of the colony would play it for recreation. Benjamin was a sports fan and, as he felt that physical fitness was important both for health reasons and as an outlet for the young people of the colony (women as well as men). He provided the bats, balls, gloves and uniforms, most of which were made on site at IHD workshops. During the early years this play was informal, but by 1912 an official team was formed by IHD business manager Francis Thorpe and was beginning to play against local teams. Throughout the rest of the decade, the IHD team played against minor league teams from Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio.

By 1920, the House of David baseball teams had become well-known in the Midwest, and their games against area teams had become a major attraction at the IHD’s Eden Springs park (Gitersonke 1996:13). People who came to see the novelty of men with long hair and full beards playing baseball were impressed by the talent of the players on the field and during the “pepper game,” a demonstration of reflexes in which several
players would toss and juggle balls, feign throws, and pass the ball behind their backs and under their legs, all in an attempt to obscure the ball from the other players. At its best the IHD pepper game rivaled a first-rate circus act and became wildly popular with fans. It was often done to the tune “The House of David Blues,” a nationally popular early jazz song composed about the IHD bands. The less-famous House of David basketball teams played the early Harlem Globe Trotters, and the basketball version of the pepper game performed by the IHD teams to “The House of David Blues” became the inspiration for the Globe Trotters own pepper game to the accompaniment of “Sweet Georgia Brown.” The IHD pepper game was so popular that it became their signature and was featured on all of the IHD baseball posters (Hawkins and Bertolino 2000:50).

By the mid 1920s the IHD had four teams: a traveling team, a home team, and both boys and girls junior teams. By this time the home team was charging admission, and the traveling team was playing all over the country. The traveling team was averaging 180-200 games a year (Gitersonke 1996:15). After the colony split, both the House of David and the City of David continued to send out traveling teams. After WWII many of the players were not even colony members; they were minor league-ringers hired by the IHD (Gitersonke 1996:20).

In the early 1930s, the IHD introduced a new innovation to their baseball games; they begin to travel with floodlights and generators that allowed games to be played after dark. This was seen as quite a novelty by the attendees of the games, for many people at that time did not have electricity in their homes. It is interesting to note that the first major league baseball game to be played at night under the lights did not occur until four
years after the IHD first began to play night baseball. Even more significant was that the IHD team toured with the all African-American Kansas City Monarchs on that first night-game series. Always looking for new ways to attract audiences, the IHD teams sought high profile athletes to play for their teams. During the 1930s these athletes included famous African-American players Satchel Paige and Cy Perkins, and famous female athletes like Jackie Mitchell and former Olympic gold medalist Mildred Didrikson (Gitersonke 1996:30-31, Hawkins and Bertolino 2000-83). In 1936 the House of David team offered Babe Ruth 36,000 dollars a year to play for their team (Fogerty 1981.ix). Though Babe declined the offer, it illustrates the major role that baseball played in the colony and its public perception. During WWII, the teams were suspended, not only because of a lack of anyone to play against but because some of the colony’s players served in non-combatant roles in the war (Gitersonke 1996:38-39). By the late 1940s and early 1950s the popularity of minor league and semi-pro baseball had begun to wane. As George Anderson, a player for the House of David teams observed, the advent of television killed minor league baseball (Gitersonke 1996:43). Baseball remained as popular as ever, but more and more people began to watch major league games on television rather than going out to minor league games. The House of David team played its last game in 1937, while the City of David continued to play on the road and at home until 1957. Today, of all of the IHD enterprises, it is the baseball teams that have left the biggest mark upon the history of American culture. Several books have been written on them, and they were discussed at length in historian Ken Burns’ PBS documentary on the history of baseball.
Fig. 1, Benjamin and Mary Purnell (House of David Archive).

Fig. 2, The Ark: the first building constructed on the IHD property in Benton Harbor (House of David Archive).
Fig. 3, Early map of the IHD’s Eden Springs amusement park showing both the streetcar and train lines (House of David Archive).
Fig. 4, One of the IHD’s jazz bands from the 1920s (House of David Archive).

Fig. 5, Crowds at the IHD’s Eden Springs amusement park (House of David Archive).
Fig. 6, The IHD’s booth at the 1933-34 World’s Fair in Chicago (House of David Archive).

Fig. 7, Promotional photo handed out by IHD missionaries (House of David Archive).
Fig. 8, Promotional poster for an IHD baseball game.
Chapter III: Cult and Sect Dynamics and how the House of David Fits the Models

This chapter will discuss some anthropological and sociological models for how cult dynamics function. It will also address how the IHD fits or does not fit with these models.

Anthropologists classify the spread of a religious message through proselytization as cultural change by diffusion, since a cultural idea or value is being transmitted from one group to another without any migration or invasion necessarily taking place\(^9\).

Proselytizers have gone by different names throughout history: apostles, ministers, preachers, missionaries and prophets. From the earliest days of organized religion there have existed groups who feel the need to spread their beliefs and individuals who take this as their personal mission.

How do we classify these people? To begin with, in this thesis, prophets will be defined in relation to their sociological role, not their religious role. Many anthropologists and sociologists recognize the existence of “Great Persons”; that is people who, regardless of the environment in which they operate, bring about great change because of the interaction of their personal qualities (i.e. charisma, intellect, creativity, and political prowess) with the larger dynamics of the time (Roberts 1984:186). While they may recognize that certain individuals play galvanizing roles in various movements, their success in these roles is explained in secular, not religious, terms. As was previously discussed in regard to millennial movements, the social, political, and economic environment of the time and place may have as much to do with

Weber was unconcerned with whether converts are attracted principally to the prophet himself or to his doctrine (Weber 1968:254). The prophet is differentiated from the priest in that a priest receives his authority by dint of his association with an already established religious institution or tradition. A prophet, on the other hand, has no authority other than that which he creates himself by virtue of his charisma and the charisma of his revelation (Weber 1968:253). While a prophet may be affiliated with an existing religion and may draw on established scriptures, he does not seek to gain converts to a mainstream religion; rather he seeks to draw converts to his own personal revelation or reinterpretation. By the same token, a prophet preaches by his own will; he is not sent out to spread the word by an already established institution (according to this criterion, Benjamin is a prophet and the Israelites who were sent out to preach in the name of Benjamin and the IHD were preachers or missionaries) (Weber 1968:258). Weber stated that true prophets are always “outsiders,” that is, they have no or only loose ties to any established group and are therefore free to preach as they like. Over the years,
this has been modified, most notably by Peter Berger. It is now recognized that prophets can and do arise from within existing institutions, though at some point they either reject or seek to modify the institution, thereby becoming a prophet in their own right (Berger 1963:940-950).

Weber pointed out that most prophets have to produce some sort of “charismatic authentication” (Weber 1968:254). This generally took the form of magic or miracles. Jesus turned water into wine, Moses parted the Red Sea, and Jonah survived being swallowed by a whale. There is a long tradition of these kinds of miraculous feats in Evangelical Christian sects, where at “tent revivals” preachers perform such miracles as healing the sick and crippled, and show signs of stigmata. In modern times, however, these “miracles” may also be of a more unobtrusive sort.

**Benjamin and Mary as Charismatic Prophets**

Both the House of David and the City of David still exist today and are technically open to coverts. However, both groups have been essentially in suspended animation for several decades. For this reason, I will be focusing mainly on the earlier days of the group, from approximately 1903, when the colony at Benton Harbor was founded, to approximately 1970, when both groups were in an established decline.

Weber made the point that the environment (political, social, physical, cultural) of a certain time and place may have more impact on the success or failure of a prophet than on the prophet’s message or personal charisma. This statement certainly holds true for
the original Southcottian church, which definitely owed much of its success to the
political climate of the time, when much of the English population was disenchanted by
the loss of the American colonies and the traditional agrarian-based economy was
beginning to feel the pressures of the Industrial Revolution. It is harder to make a case
for the climate of the times having a big effect on the success of Benjamin and Mary at
drawing converts. However, since the area in which they first started preaching had sided
with the Confederacy during the U.S. Civil War, the disillusionment felt by the people in
this area in the decades after the South’s defeat and reconstruction could have been a
contributing factor.

While it has been argued that some religious groups can come into being without
the influence of a charismatic leader, the IHD was not one of them. Both Benjamin and
Mary were textbook examples of ethical prophets; they felt that they had received a
revelation from God that gave them authority on His behalf. Benjamin and Mary both
conform to Weber’s prediction that prophets will be “outsiders.” Even though they were
associated with another religious group (the Jezreelites) during the time in which
Benjamin was consolidating his own religious ideas, they were still considered outsiders
to mainstream society because they were associated with a non-mainstream religious
movement and they led a nomadic existence, moving often from community to
community and never putting down roots anywhere. At the same time, they could also be
described as fitting the mold proposed by Berger, as prophets who began as members of
the establishment but end up challenging said establishment with their own revolutionary
ideas. Benjamin and Mary started out as members of the Jezreelite church, but ended up
founding their own church based on Benjamin’s revelation of Mary and himself as the seventh prophet. They later recruited many members from the Jezreelite church in America and the Wroeite church in Australia.

Weber made the point that a charismatic prophet is often required to perform some sort of miracle as proof of authenticity. This is not particularly relevant to Benjamin, who was the focus in the days of nomadic preaching and in the early days of the colony. The closest that he came to performing any miraculous feat was that when he preached, many of his followers claimed that he could read minds and was known to respond verbally to the thoughts of his audience. One early colonist remembers that when he first saw Benjamin preach he thought to himself “I wonder what he would look like without his hat on.” Benjamin then stopped in the middle of his preaching, removed his hat, and said, “Someone in the audience was just wondering what I look like without my hat on” (Adkin 1990:32). Mary too was believed by many of her followers to be possessed of second sight. In one speech during WWII she predicted that Hitler would lose the war and that the Germans would never be able to invade England. At other times she is said to have predicted the actions of colony members and to know about them without having been told (Adkin 1990:323). While some of this may have been wishful thinking, if the colony members believed it, then it fits with what was observed by Weber.
Conversion and Commitment

Once the prophet is established, he or she faces many questions important to the longevity of the cult or sect. Four big questions, as iterated by Roberts, are: (1) how to attract and convert new members; (2) how to engender a deep commitment to the group in these members; (3) how to bring about the institutionalization of the group; and (4) how best to employ the resources of the group (Roberts 1984:134).

The question of how to attract and convert new members was touched upon in the previous section discussing millennial cults. I will now address it in greater detail. This is a topic that has been discussed in depth by many authors, and they differ on many points, including what the steps are, what mechanisms are responsible for the different steps, and whether the steps need to be progressive or not.

Rosabeth Kanter (1968) identified three distinct phases to the process of commitment to a cult or sect. Each of these phases is characterized by the renunciation of some facet of the old life, and a subsequent acceptance of some facet of the new life. Though these phases are presented here as an ordered progression, there is no particular order in which they must happen. Though in many instances affective commitment comes first, this is not always the case (Roberts 1984:157).

Phase one is the phase of instrumental commitment, in which the potential member makes a commitment to the group or organization as a whole. This phase is marked by a sacrifice (of possessions, the previous way of life, etc.) paired with an investment (of money, property, time, etc) (Roberts 1984:139-140). As mentioned in the
millennialism section, once this initial sacrifice and investment are made, people are often reluctant to back out.

Phase two is the affective commitment, in which the new group member commits to and becomes emotionally dependent on the people in the group. This phase is marked by a renunciation of other emotional ties outside the group, coinciding with communion, an establishing of emotional ties with those inside of the group (Roberts 1984:141-144). It is this step that leads to the insularity of the group, a topic that will be discussed at length later.

Phase three is the moral commitment, in which the new member makes a commitment to the ideology of the group. The paired components of this phase are more complex than those in the first two phases. The first component is mortification, usually accomplished by the use of mutual criticism, wherein all group members are required to share their sins, temptations, and shortcomings with each other in an open forum. This serves the double purpose of (1) making the group members vulnerable and emotionally pliable, and (2) demonstrating the care, concern, and interest shown for them by the other group members. Now that the new member has been broken down, the second component, transcendence, is introduced. Though the new member has been made to feel humble and unworthy through the process of mortification, he is now comforted by the fact that, as part of the group, he is worthwhile, and will one day be victorious (as part of the group) (Roberts 1984:145-147).

While it has been somewhat in vogue in the past few decades to attribute the powerful influence that cults and sects exert over their members to “brainwashing” or
“mind control,” there is little evidence of these practices within religious groups. The term “brainwashing” was originally used by the journalist Edward Hunter to characterize the type of coercive thought reform that was being practiced by the newly established communist government in China (Hunter, 1951). Since then the word has become an ambiguous term used more by writers and journalists in reference to a somewhat mystical process than a precise term used by scientists to characterize a specific mental or physical process (Robbins and Anthony 1980:67). The original studies that suggested threats and coercion as playing a prominent role in the conversion process have been shown to be biased (Roberts 1984:137). It is now felt by many that much of the testimony regarding brainwashing, provided by former members of religious groups who are charged with practicing it, has been motivated by a desire on the part of the former members to shift the blame for their actions as part of the group onto someone or something beyond their power (Robbins and Anthony 1980:66).

These three phases of conversion are used to deal with the first two issues facing the cult or sect. New members are initially attracted by the charisma of either the prophet or the group as a whole. In phase one they are enjoined to make investments of money, time, and energy in the group. The investment of money binds them to the group by fear of losing the investment if they were to back out. The investment of time and energy binds them to the group by engendering a feeling of ownership of the ideas and philosophies of the group, and thus more likely to defend and stand by the group (this point can be illustrated by the fact that one would probably be far more likely to defend the ideas set down in a book that one had helped to write than a book which one had
simply read and agreed with). For many people drawn to cults, the second phase is the most decisive. By severing previous relationships, the new member is made very vulnerable, and just when that vulnerability is at its peak, members of the new group “save the day” as it were, by embracing the new prospective member as part of the group, investing much time and emotion in him/her, and generally making him/her feel loved and wanted. It is not hard to see the appeal that this sort of attention would hold for disenfranchised members of society. People who, for some reason, are lacking supportive interpersonal relationships (runaways or children estranged from their families, people who are divorced or widowed, elderly people who have outlived the rest of their families) or are lacking in self esteem due to internal (anxiety, depression, poor self image, etc.) or external (unemployment, alcoholism, past abuse, etc.) problems are often eager for affection and approval; it has been shown that cults tend to target just these kinds of people (Roberts 1984:143). Once they have gotten a taste of this love and acceptance, the new members are unlikely to want to give it up. It is not surprising that some of the people who made accusations as part of the recovered memory movement later reported that the group counseling atmosphere of love and acceptance was a major factor in their “recovering” memories of past abuse (Shermer 1997:109). This is not to say that these people were consciously lying just to be a part of the group, but it is clear that for psychologically vulnerable people (people who attended the sessions generally started doing so on the advice of therapists who were treating them for depression or other non-specific psychological problems) the need to be part of the group can exert a
powerful suggestive force. It is in this phase that there begins what I feel is a somewhat overlooked mechanism of cult dynamics: the insularity feedback loop.

**Systems Theory and the Insularity Feedback Loop**

While most authors concede that insularity is a key to the cohesion of the group, they generally say little else, save perhaps for a reference to insularity as providing a prophet with a means of controlling the group. The concept of the insularity feedback loop goes farther; it uses systems theory to explain how insularity can be self-perpetuating, as well as why some groups are able to maintain a certain level of insularity for a long duration, while other groups destabilize.

Systems theory or systems analysis is generally defined as “The application of formal, including mathematical, methods to the task of describing physical, biological, and social phenomenon” (Rodin et al. 1977:747). The use of systems theory in anthropology was introduced by Gregory Bateson in his work *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, where he used it to describe the cycles that are involved in alcoholism and schizophrenia, as well as human evolution (Bateson 1972). Like structuralism, systems analysis seeks to understand the underlying structures and mechanisms within a social system that result in observable phenomenon (Rodin et al. 1977:747).

Because it is concerned with how different variables in the system are influenced by each other, systems theory is often employed by the social sciences to understand cultural change or stasis. If changes in one variable are seen to produce changes in
another variable, then the variables are linked. If the changes are symmetrical, that is, positive changes in one variable lead to positive changes in another variable or negative changes in one variable lead to negative changes in another variable, then the change is considered to be “positive.” If positive change in one variable leads to negative change in another variable or vice versa, then the change is “negative.” When closed loops are formed within this system they are referred to as “feedback loops”: changes in variable x affect changes in variable y, which then affect changes in variable x again. Positive feedback loops are destabilizing to the systems; if left to function they may eventually lead to collapse. Negative feedback loops are stabilizing; when left to function they can serve to keep the system at homeostasis (Lowe 1985:42).

In the case under discussion here insularity feedback loops function thusly: the prophet, in order to control his followers, encourages insularity in the group. This insularity has the dual effect of making sure that the members are not exposed to points of view that are contrary to that of the leader while at the same time ensuring that they, being cut off from the rest of the world, will become emotionally and psychologically dependent on the leader and the rest of the group. The leader encourages the members to turn inward by vilifying the outside world and nonmembers of the group (Roberts 1984:143). If the outside world is evil, then it makes sense to restrict interactions with it, and what interactions there are tend to not be of a very convivial nature. What follows is a self-fulfilling prophecy: the members label the outside world as evil and adjust their interactions with it accordingly; this restricted and often uncomfortable interaction is viewed as strange behavior by the rest of the world, which begins to treat the members
with distrust and suspicion. Members take the suspicion with which they are treated by the rest of the world as further proof that the outside world is evil, and the cycle renews itself. The cult or sect itself acts as the closed system in which the feedback loop functions, and word of mouth and the close living proximity of the members acts as the mechanism which cycles information through the system. This type of feedback loop, where the input and the output are positively correlated, is a positive feedback loop, and if allowed to develop on its own, it can eventually reach a critical mass that cannot be maintained, and the system will destabilized. This is, in fact, what generally happens in situations where a quickly cycling insularity feedback loop is at work; the outside world is vilified to such an extent that it becomes a menace that must either be protected against or escaped from by any means necessary (as in the Jonestown mass suicide), or the group simply cannot maintain its high level of anxiety and either disbands or forces the perception of the outside world to change. I will later discuss how the IHD managed to maintain the insular nature of the colony without initiating a feedback loop and destabilizing the system.

**Possible Problems with the Insularity Feedback Loop Theory**

There are some possible problems with the insularity feedback loop theory. Many of them are issues that are often encountered when systems theory is applied to social systems, while some are specific to the understanding of how feedback loops function and affect the system in which they operate.
A fundamental issue with systems analysis is the problem of whether human actions can always be characterized mathematically in terms of input and output, as this model does not allow for the variation that characterizes human motivations and interactions. For this reason, systems theory is only useful when applied to a system large enough to allow for this natural variation without skewing the data too much. Just as macroeconomic theory, because it assumes humans act rationally, is not particularly useful for predicting the actions of an individual consumer, systems theory is only useful when applied to groups, not individuals (Rodin et al. 1977:751).

A second issue that is faced when applying systems theory is what level of the system to apply it to. If a specific cultural group is being studied, who can be included in that group? In some instances it may be easier to identify the limitations of the group than others: it may be more apparent who is a member of an isolated band of hunter/gatherers than who is a member of a subcultural group that exists in an urban area (Rodin et al. 1977:750). Because the IHD is an insular religious sect that lives communally, it is less difficult to define as a group.

**Stages of Commitment**

“Stages of Commitment” refers to the different types of commitment that an individual makes to a group and what sequence they generally occur in. The moral commitment phase deals mainly with encouraging commitment by the members. The experience of revealing one’s innermost secrets and sins to a trusted person or persons
has long been known to have therapeutic value. This is, after all, the basis for the multi-
million dollar psychological counseling industry, and the cults/sects have tools that the
psychologists do not. While psychologists cannot claim to have all of the answers, the
cult/sect can. Once the member has been psychologically broken down the group can
offer transcendence, the chance to be redeemed by membership in the group. While this
may be powerful it can’t be said to be coercive since the member is not being subjected
to it against their will and they are not being threatened in order to maintain authority.

John Lofland’s theory of conversion, unlike Kanter’s theory of commitment, is
progressive in nature. He identifies seven stages that possible converts have to pass
through. These stages must be passed through in a particular order; they can be
compared to a series of sieves that progressively filter out more and more people. The
stages, progress from least to most specific are:

1. Tension or dissatisfaction with life.
2. A frame of mind that would accept a religious solution to this dissatisfaction.
3. A dissatisfaction with mainstream religions.
4. Being at a turning point in one’s life.
5. Having close bonds with the prospective group (affective commitment).
6. Weak bonds with family and community (outside world).

Though a case can be made for most of Lofland’s stages, some have come to be
discredited. In particular stage five (having a close bond with the prospective group)
cannot be said to hold true for most cults/sects. Lofland’s seven stages were all based on
his extensive study of the Unification Church (Moonies), whose members maintain friendship networks outside of the church. For a more insular group where the members do not form close ties with none group members, it is unlikely that converts would be gained in this way. Some authors have also found fault with Lofland’s insistence on progressive stages, pointing out that in interviews, many cult members state that they were not particularly dissatisfied with their lives until they became involved with a group and had the faults in their way of life pointed out to them by the members (Roberts 1984:154, Kox et. Al.1991:229-237).

Conversion and Commitment in the House of David

The conversion and commitment process of the IHD appears to follow closely the three phases of commitment described by Kanter, in content if not in order. It is more difficult to make an argument for Lofland’s seven stages of conversion. The first phase undergone by aspiring IHD members was Kanter’s phase three, moral commitment. During this phase, the aspiring members were expected to become familiar with the teachings and theology of the group, to correspond with the colony, and then to make an informed decision as to whether or not they still wished to become members. The next phase, instrumental commitment, was entered into only after the new members had been accepted and had relocated to the colony. When they officially became members, they were required to give up all of their money and most of their possessions to the colony. They vowed to follow the rules of the colony, to live communally, and to be celibate. It
was not until this point that they entered the affective commitment phase, where they begin to bond with other group members. It has been suggested by critics that the IHD purposely broke up families and had members of the same family live in different places in order to make them more emotionally dependent on other colony members and more open to indoctrination. This charge has been largely disproven. While it is true that some people were stationed away from their families (e.g., fathers or sons would sometime be sent to work in the lumber camps or on the farms while women were left at the colony, or vice versa) this was done for economic reasons, and in fact many families did live together at the colony (Fogerty 1981:102).

A strong case cannot be made that the IHD followed Lofland’s seven stages of conversion. The most compelling evidence for this is the fact that the IHD screening process purposely sought to weed out the types of people described by Lofland’s stages 1-4. They purposely sought members wanting to join with their families, as they felt that having the support of a close family unit would be important to the success of new colony members, in direct contract to Loftland’s stage 6. The only stages for which an argument can be made are stages 5 and 7.

One of the most significant points of departure between the IHD and many cults/sects is related to how the IHD sought to recruit members and how they weeded out recruits who were not suitable. Many cults/sects understand that their best targets are people who, as Lofland observed, are dissatisfied with their lives and religions, lacking in close personal ties, and willing to accept a religious answer to their problems. Thus, it is these people that they target for conversion. The IHD took almost the exact opposite
track. They understood that membership in their group was not for the faint of heart. The communal lifestyle, restricted comings and goings, limited diet, celibacy, and dedication to Benjamin, Mary, the group, and the theology would only be tolerable for people who had made a sincere spiritual commitment. They thought that those who joined to gain acceptance or to escape some set of circumstances at home would quickly abandon the colony. For this reason, they specifically did not target the kind of people described by Lofland. Membership was not granted carelessly. People were often required to spend a long period of time corresponding with the colony before they were “called home” (issued a formal invitation to join the colony). During this waiting period, it was not unusual for prospective members to be visited by a colony member (usually someone who was in the area traveling with one of the bands or sports teams), who would then report back to Benjamin and Mary their impressions of the potential members. If the impressions were favorable, then the potential members may have been invited to come and stay at the colony on a trial basis before they were offered membership. During the 1900s and the 1910s the membership requirements were even more stringent, due to the large number of people wanting to join and to the fact that several ex-members had sued the colony, trying to recover the money and/or property that they had given up when they became members. The threat of lawsuits from dissatisfied members made them even more determined not to admit anyone who was not prepared for a sustained commitment. One instance that illustrates the point of informed total commitment was Mary’s reaction to several young couples in the City of David who wanted to have children and promised to raise them in the IHD religion. Mary responded
that the IHD religion was something that people must chose of their own free will; it would be wrong to indoctrinate children in to it from birth (Taylor, personal communication). Even in recent times, when the membership of both colonies has dwindled and aged, anyone interested in converting is required to spend years learning about the religion and the way of life before being considered for membership (Taylor 2007, personal communication).

**Insularity in the House of David: Beating the Feedback Loop**

The role that insularity plays in the dynamics of the cult/sect is another area in which the IHD differs from other groups. Unlike many insular cults/sects that develop a destabilizing feedback loop and burn out within a fairly short period, the IHD managed to be both insular and open at the same time; to have positive, productive interactions with the outside world while still maintaining its group identity and communal way of life.

There may be two main reasons for this. The first is that the colony members drew a distinct line between outsiders and colony members. While outsiders were not reviled as being “corrupt” or “evil,” colony members did not generally interact with them on the same level on which they interacted with other colony members. Outsiders were treated with politeness (as they were often clients, customers, or business partners of the colony), were dealt with fairly, and served as the pool from which potential members were drawn. When it came to discussing the business of the colony, the intricacies of the theology, airing grievances, and confiding emotions, however, it was clear that other
colony members were the only suitable confidants (Taylor, personal communication). This dichotomy allowed the colony members to have cordial interactions with outsiders, who, in turn, were not given cause to be suspicious of the colony. Even though membership has dwindled since the 1970s, this system is still functioning over 100 years later.

The other reason for the absence of an insularity feedback loop at the IHD has to do with the business and proselytizing practices of the colony. As outlined previously, insularity feedback loops form when a negative view of the outside world causes group members to withdraw from it. This in turn gives the outside world a negative view of the group, and the cycle perpetuates itself. This type of cycle was never given a chance to develop in the IHD because the colony’s varied business interests and proselytizing media kept group members in almost constant contact with non-group members. The colony members who are the best examples of this constant interaction with outsiders are those who were members of the sports teams and the bands. Not only did these members have constant contact with members of the outside world in the course of their travels, but they also actually lived in the outside world, spending months at a time on the road and away from the colony. Especially in the later years after the colony split, both the bands and the sports teams contracted non-IHD members to play with them. These non-Israelites lived and traveled with the bands and the teams, and were a further way in which the outside world became part of daily life for many colony members.

Even members who lived at the colony often had regular contact with the outside world. Those who worked at the amusement park, the hotel, the restaurants, and the
resorts all had to deal with outsiders as a basic requirement of their jobs. In addition, some colony members held jobs outside of the colony and had to work in the outside world every day. The IHD’s lumber camps, farms, and canning plant were mostly staffed by colony members, but during harvest time and at many other times of the year outside laborers were brought in to work alongside the colonists.

All of this interaction with outsiders made it unlikely that an insularity feedback loop could develop in the IHD. Moreover, it would have been bad for business. Since most of the colony’s income was derived from its business dealings with the outside world, any tendency toward extreme insularity would have required the colony to restructure its source of income. The same is true for its preaching and recruiting practices, all of which required constant, positive interaction with the outside world. For this reason the IHD has managed to walk a very fine line for over 100 years; it has capitalized on its relationship with the outside world in order to sustain itself, both economically and in the court of public opinion.

As of 2012 the IHD is still a functioning communal religious group. There are only a handful of members left, but they still live according to Benjamin’s teachings, earn their livings from various business enterprises, and maintain correspondence with the rare acolyte who wishes to learn more about the Israelite way of life. Though new converts are rare (the last to join was in the early 1990’s), the group is still open to them and still follows Benjamin and Mary’s rigorous vetting process. As mentioned previously, the group interprets its dwindling numbers as a sign that the Ingathering is finally on the verge of coming to pass (Taylor 2007, personal communication).
Chapter IV: Modern Examples of Sect Insularity

Insularity in Modern Religious Groups

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that the IHD was very successful at avoiding the pitfall of the insularity feedback loop. I define “success” in this case as meaning that from its 1903 inception to the present day the IHD has avoided destabilization due to increasing levels of insularity. The group has always managed to remain insular while at the same time staying engaged with the greater community. While it is true that since the 1970s the group numbers have dwindled this, can be attributed to factors other than insularity destabilization, such as no children being born to replenish numbers, an aversion to indoctrinating children, and changing lifestyles and economic factors that have made membership in communal religious groups less attractive to people.

Other cults/sects have had varying levels of success when it comes to maintaining the equilibrium of insularity. I will now take a brief look at three other religious groups: The Amish and the Hutterites, who have been successful at maintaining their insularity without destabilizing, and the Peoples Temple, who got caught in the insularity feedback loop and were ultimately destroyed by it. I will give a brief history and description of each group, and conclude by comparing and contrasting how they have dealt with the issue of insularity.
The Hutterites

The Hutterites are a Christian religious sect who live in several communal settlements in South Dakota, Montana, and parts of south-central Canada. They trace their roots back to the emergence of the Anabaptist movement that grew out of the Protestant Reformation and the resulting Peasants’ Wars in Germany during the first half of the sixteenth century (Bennett 1967:25). In 1533 an Anabaptist minister named Jacob Hutter united three Anabaptist groups and persuaded them to begin practicing a communal lifestyle. These people became known as the Huttarian Brethren, and by 1547 there were estimated to be 20,000 of them living in central Europe (Bennett 1967:27). They were granted protection by Moravian rulers and acted as managers and stewards in many areas. In 1622, however, they were exiled from the region under pressure from the Catholic Church. Many of the colonies disbanded and, though they kept their faith and even increased their numbers, it would be several hundred years before communal living again became the norm for the Hutterites. In the 1770s, Catherine the Great offered asylum to the Hutterites, many of whom then settled in the Ukraine. The Russian government withdrew its support from the Hutterites in 1870 after they had refused to intermarry with the Russians. It was at this time that many Hutterites made the journey to North America to take advantage of the free land made available by American expansion west (Bennett 1967:30).

After their arrival in North America, the Hutterites broke up into three separate groups: the Darius, the Schmieden, and the Lehrer. It was at this point that they returned
to their traditionally communal lifestyle (Bennett 1967:31). They have since continued to increase their population and to found new colonies in The United States and Canada. All modern North American Hutterites are descended from the 800 Hutterites who originally migrated there during the 1870s.

The Hutterites are Anabaptists; that is, they believe that baptism should only be performed on adults who have made a conscious choice to accept the religion. They also believe in communal living and the forsaking of worldly affairs. They have traditionally been farmers and ranch managers, and modern North American Hutterites make their living by farming (Bennett 1967:35). Unlike the Amish, the Hutterites do not scorn modern technology; though they do not generally own television sets (as this encourages involvement in the outside world), they do have telephones, automobiles, and modern farming equipment.

The Hutterites are an exceptionally good example of a communal religious group that has avoided the insularity feedback loop. Since their arrival in North America, they have lived communally and have continually expanded their population and their settlements. Like the IHD, they have managed to maintain their insularity without destabilizing and now have about 45,000 members (Huttarian Bethern 2012).

The Amish

The Amish, like the Hutterites, grew out of the Anabaptist movement of the mid-sixteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century the Anabaptist movement had
split into many different groups and denominations (Kraybill 1989:4). One of these
denominations, the Mennonites (so named after their founder, Menno Simons), split in
two over a variety of issues, the main one being how excommunicated members should
be treated. The leader of the dissenting group, Jacob Ammann, felt that excommunicated
members should not only be denied communion (as they were under Mennonite law) but
should also be shunned from society. This difference of opinion led to the founding of
the Amish branch of the Anabaptists in 1711. The first Amish settlements in the New
World were founded in 1737 in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (Kraybill 1989:7).

Like the Hutterites, the Amish have traditionally made their living from farming.
In more modern times they have also profited from the tourist industry that has grown up
around their settlements by producing goods for the tourist trade. They differ from the
Hutterites in that, while they live in communities that are generally organized along
family lines, they do not live communally. Families maintain their own farms, property,
and money, as opposed to the Hutterites, where all money and property is owned and
managed by the community as a whole.

One of the traditional hallmarks of the Amish faith has been their rejection of
modern society and technological innovations. It can be difficult to explain the criteria
by which the Amish judge what technology they accept and to what extent. Most Amish
people will ride in cars, but they will not drive or own them. While the Amish do not
have telephones in their homes (on the assumption that a phone in the house would
encourage gossip and connection with the outside world) many will have a phone in a
booth out at the end of their driveways to use for business purposes. Over the years,
several divisions have occurred over issues of technology and insularity. This has resulted in several modern denominations within the Amish Church: The Old Order Amish, the Peachey Amish, and the New Order Amish. The Old Order Amish are the original group; the other two have branched off, in 1911 and 1966, respectively (Kraybill 1989:21-22). Though they are not technically a communal religious group, the Amish do have a high level of insularity. Like the IHD, they have been successful at maintaining this insularity without destabilizing.

The Peoples Temple

The Peoples Temple is often lumped together with the “new religion” movements that developed in America during the 1960s and early 1970s (Richardson 1980:242). The Peoples Temple was founded in Indiana during the 1950s by James Warren “Jim” Jones, a communist party member who was interested in starting a church as a way to reach out to the poor and oppressed. Although Jones was himself an atheist, he recognized the power that religion has to galvanize people, and he utilized it to spread a socialist message that promoted racial, sexual, and economic equality. During the group’s early years in Indiana they faced persecution because of the integrated nature of their church in a time and place where churches were normally segregated. By the time the group moved to California in the early 1970s, 70-80% of its members were African-American. Many of those who joined came as married couples or whole families (Richardson 1980:243-244, Nelson 2006).
The Peoples Temple started construction on the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, an agricultural collective in Guyana which came to be known as “Jonestown,” in 1970. During the first seven years of its development it was staffed by revolving teams of temple members who cleared the land, built communal housing, and started agricultural work. The site of the settlement was five miles from the nearest village, and the jungle environment made it very difficult to get out of the area without access to a plane or boat (Nelson 2006). Jones arrived at the settlement in 1977 with several hundred more followers, and it was at that point that the insularity levels of the group started to become dangerously high.

Most new religious groups follow a similar pattern with regards to insularity: when the group is small and newly formed, insularity levels tend to be high. As the group gets larger and must start to institutionalize, the insularity levels tend to drop. There are several reasons for this, including the fact that the group must have dealings with the outside world in order to earn income and to recruit new members. As new members from different geographic areas and socioeconomic levels join the group they bring in new perspectives that help to counteract the growth of insularity. The Peoples Temple, however, followed an opposite pattern: the group had lower initial levels of insularity that increased over time as it became larger, likely as a reaction to the threat posed by the previously mentioned new perspectives being brought into the group (Richardson 1980:146). In this way, it functioned exactly as an insularity feedback loop would be expected to function. Jones warned his followers about the evils of the outside world, often making reference to threats that the group faced from the CIA or IRS. As
this paranoia grew, group members tended to withdraw from the outside world, which in turn caused growing suspicion of the group by outsiders. As some group members defected and started speaking of the climate of insularity and suspicion within the group, outside suspicion of the group continued to increase, with former allies deserting or renouncing the group. The move to Guyana was prompted by the difficulty of maintaining this level of insularity in a more accessible location.

On November 18, 1978, members of the Peoples Temple shot and killed several members of a delegation headed by U.S. Congressman Leo Ryan that had come to Guyana to investigate the temple. This proved to be the act that destabilized the system. Later on the day of the shootings Jones delivered a final speech where he directed his followers to commit suicide by drinking poison-laced Kool-Aid as a way to escape the wrath of the U.S. government in the wake of the shootings. Nine hundred and nine people died at Jonestown and Jones, himself, was found dead from a gunshot wound to the head.

The Peoples Temple provides an important case study of a group that was destroyed by the insularity feedback loop. Elevating levels of insularity took this group, in just a few years, from a fairly stable community to one that saw suicide as a logical way escape from the forces of the outside world.
Chapter V: Cultural Persistence and Institutionalization

Sociological Models of Institutionalization

The coalescence of a cult/sect around a charismatic prophet is only the first stage, but for many cults/sects, it is also the last stage that is reached. This is due to the difficult processes of routinization and institutionalization. In order for a cult/sect to continue to grow, it must undergo these processes or face stagnation and dissolution (Roberts 1984:190). The terms routinization and institutionalization are generally used interchangeably by sociologists; they can both be described as the processes by which a group develops stable routines and structures which are self-perpetuating; i.e. they are not dependent on the presence of the charismatic leader to function (Roberts 1984:190). When a group begins, the process of institutionalization is highly variable; it depends on various factors such as the environment in which the group functions, the specifics of the doctrine that it follows, and how fast it is growing. Another major influence on the rate of institutionalization in a group is the personality of the prophet. Some prophets, such as Jesus, took few steps toward institutionalization during their lives. They left only a small group of disorganized followers who were left to organize themselves and carry on the message after the death of the prophet. Other prophets, such as Mohammed and, more recently, the Reverend Moon, were gifted organizers who began to institutionalize their groups very early on (Roberts 1984:191).
There are two main tests that require some measure of institutionalization. The first is the test of succession; that is, who takes over the leadership of the group when the prophet dies? Generally, the more institutionalized the group, the easier the transition. This is because in a more institutionalized group, some of the charisma that was originally manifested in the person of the prophet will have been transferred to his writings, his rituals, and to the group as a whole, making the issue of who actually wears the mantle less important than it would be in a group where all the power and charisma is still held by the prophet. This is not to say, however, that even in highly institutionalized cults/septs the selection of the successor is always without strife. At the time of the death of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, Islam was already highly institutionalized. This did not prevent a major conflict over who should succeed the Prophet. The conflict eventually led to a partitioning of the religion into two branches, the Sunni and the Shi’a, who are still in conflict in many parts of the world even today, over 1,000 years later.

A second major test of institutionalization is how the group deals with the issue of financial support. For any group of people, the problem of how to support themselves is a difficult one. Most mainstream religions are able to support themselves by requiring that their members donate a certain amount of their income to the church (tithing, as this practice is called by Christians). Other religions may require payment from people requesting special religious services. This is common in Hinduism where the pandit, or holy man, is paid to perform poojas (religious ceremonies) and to give blessings at special occasions (births, deaths, marriages, etc). For a cult or sect, however, the problem of funding can be even more difficult. If the prophet and at least a couple of group
members are to devote their time to ministering to the group and to recruiting new converts, then they must be supported by the rest of the group. In addition, resources are needed to help promote the group and pursue converts. The manner in which groups deal with this problem is a good indicator of their level of institutionalization. Many communal cults/septs require their members to turn over all of their money and property to the group when they become members, this money (ostensibly) being used to support the group. Other groups (the Hare Krishna being a good example) support themselves through begging and solicitation done by the members (this has the added benefit of helping to spread their message). Still other groups earn money through capitalist activities (the Amish support themselves by farming and by selling handmade products). Generally speaking, the more successful the group is at supporting itself, the more highly institutionalized it is, and vice versa (Roberts 1984:191).

Though the process of institutionalization is necessary for a cult or sect to continue to grow beyond a certain point, prosper, and increase its numbers, the results of the process are not always positive for the group. In the early stages of a new religious movement, the dynamics of the group make the experience very intense. Since the group at this point probably consists only of the prophet and a few followers, the constant interaction of all the group members and their personal access to the prophet makes it easy for the group members to maintain a high level of commitment to each other, the prophet, and the group. Since the group is new, the issue of succession may not need to be discussed at this point, and since the group is small in number, it may be easier to provide for. With succession and cash flow less of a problem, the group members are
free to devote most of their time to the practicing of the religion and the veneration of the prophet. As the group grows and matures this dynamic changes. As the prophet makes plans for the succession after his death, he cannot help but loosen his grip on the spiritual monopoly he has held over the group. If he has committed his visions and beliefs to writing, the writings take on some of his persona and begin to act as a stand-in for the constant personal access to him that was enjoyed by the early members. If he is grooming a particular person to succeed him, this can lead to hostilities among members who disapprove of his choice. If he does not name a specific person, this can also lead to hostilities as group members vie with one another over who will be chosen.

As the group grows, the prophet also has to deal with issues of discipline. The issue the prophet faces when it comes to maintaining order and discipline within the group is that, as he has no higher authority, if he angers his followers by doling out too much discipline, they may decide to leave him\textsuperscript{11}. Weber compared the prophet to various Near Eastern rulers. Both the rulers and the prophet need a way to enforce rules and maintain order without being seen as tyrannical by their people and, thereby, losing standing. Some Near Eastern rulers solved the problem by engaging a “Grand Vizier,” a person whose duty, among other things, was to oversee the enforcement of the rulers decrees and to “take the blame” for those which are unpopular, thereby leaving the ruler’s character unblemished. Prophets too have often turned to a lieutenant or deputy to carry out unpopular tasks so that the Peoples love and adoration of the prophet will not be tarnished (Weber 1922:38-41).
The economic activities of the group can also lead to problems. If the economic activity of the group is based on the production of goods and services, then there may be a tendency for a hierarchy of overseers (those who oversee production) and workers (those who produce) to develop. This hierarchy can lead to hostilities, as can the competition between members to fulfill the more desirable roles in production. Institutionalized economic activity also takes away from time that could have been spent on religious activities (Roberts 1984:193).

These issues can all lead to what are called “mixed motivations.” Mixed motivations occur when the secondary concerns of the group members compete with or overshadow the teachings of the prophet. These mixed motivations can often operate in a Catch-22; the solutions to concerns can create new concerns. For example, group members might cease to worry about the ability of the group to provide for them when some new moneymaking venture starts to bear fruit. Their concerns about their welfare may then be replaced by feelings of hostility engendered by the seemingly less religiously focused work that they must now perform (Roberts 1984:193-194). Mixed motivations are more likely to become a problem in groups that are institutionalized not only because of the hierarchies that tend to develop as a group becomes more institutionalized but also because the more institutionalized a group is, the more its sense of well-being is depends on factors other than the prophet. This is especially true in cases where the prophet is no longer living. In a less institutionalized group where the prophet has more control of the group’s well-being, any hostilities or mixed motivations can be dealt with directly by the prophet, who, having a divine mandate, must be obeyed. In a
group where there is no prophet or where the prophet is removed from the daily life of the group members, there can be no such “divine intervention” (Roberts 1984:194).

Though institutionalization presents certain challenges to the group that goes through it, it is an inevitable stage through which all cults/septs must pass if they are to gain more mainstream acceptance and if they are to deal with the problems of economics and succession as time passes and their numbers grow. Those that are up to the challenge may eventually grow to become mainstream religions. Many of the world’s religions, from Christianity to Buddhism, started out as a small group of people following a prophet. It was their ability to survive the process of institutionalization with their spirit and their message intact that allowed them to grow and perpetuate themselves.

The Process of Institutionalization in the House of David

The process of economic institutionalization in the IHD was a remarkably smooth one. Economic institutionalization, which has been the breaking point for countless religious groups, seems to have had almost the opposite effect on the IHD. While many groups are torn apart by the infighting that develops as the group becomes more stratified, and many others lose momentum and disintegrate when the influence of the prophet becomes too removed from the daily lives of the members, economic institutionalization and the process leading up to it actually seem to have galvanized the IHD and made it stronger.
The main reason for this probably has to do with the main goal of the group, to prepare for the ingathering of the 144,000 chosen people. The preparations for this event were varied: food had to be grown, processed, and stored; lumber had to be cut to provide the raw materials for housing; land had to be cleared; and houses had to be built. Other revenue-making ventures had to be planned and put into action in order to supply the capital that made all of these preparations possible. In many cults/septs it may have been difficult to get the members inspired to put so much hard work into all of these tasks to be performed solely to institutionalize the group. For the IHD, however, the performance of these tasks was not only a major part of their religion; it was THE major reason for the group’s existence. For this reason, the colony members put in the time and effort to see these tasks through. Benjamin, master organizer that he was, had come up with a masterful plan for how to carry a religious group through the difficult process of institutionalization.

The speed with which the IHD became economically institutionalized was truly astonishing. In the five years between 1903 and 1908, the IHD went from a tiny group of believers led by a pair of nomadic poverty stricken prophets and run out of the town in which they had been based to a rapidly-growing group with hundreds of members, numerous and varied business ventures, and income-producing enterprises. Their literature was widely circulated, and the bands, sports teams, and tourism ventures were beginning to be formed. In five years the Israelites had gone from being poor outcasts to being economic powerhouses in the region.
Economics was not the only area in which the IHD was successful at institutionalization: Benjamin was also adept at using intermediaries to deal with issues and tasks that might cause resentment toward him. As the colony grew and its businesses diversified, the questions of who lived where and who worked where became the two biggest sources of discontent in the group. It generally fell to the office staff to hand out work and living assignments. These staffers became known as “movers” and “sweepers.” The office staff was also responsible for visiting job sites to make sure that everything was running smoothly. When animosity built up in people dissatisfied with their work assignments or living arrangements, a visit from Benjamin was usually all it took to smooth things over (Adkin 1990:28). In a way, it functioned like the classic good cop/bad cop combination, with the office staff as the bad cop and Benjamin as the good cop.

While the IHD presented a textbook example of economic institutionalization and of the use of intermediaries to deal with distasteful tasks, the institutionalization of succession was a different matter. How a group deals with the problem of succession, as discussed previously, is taken by social scientists to be a good indication of the group’s level of institutionalization. While it is true that the IHD did not deal with the death of Benjamin well, and that in fact the group split into two factions shortly afterwards, it is my belief that the failure of the IHD to accomplish a smooth succession was not a product of its lack of institutionalization. I believe that the IHD’s problem with succession has its roots in two issues.
The first issue is that, as a millennial sect, the IHD did not have any reason to set up a line of succession. When the colony was started in 1903, the projected date of the Ingathering was in 1916. Since Benjamin was a young man at the time, there was no reason to think, at the beginning, that he would not be around to lead the colony for the next 13 years. As new Ingathering dates came and went without the event coming to pass, the issue of time and succession understandably got a bit touchy. To have a clear path of succession would have been, in a way, hedging the bet. For Benjamin to name someone to carry on after him would have been tantamount to him admitting that he did not believe (or at least that he was not sure) if and when the Ingathering would take place. Along the same line, for any of his followers to suggest settling on a line of succession would have been the same as admitting that they had lost faith in Benjamin and in the Ingathering. Thus, it was not that the IHD did not have the sophistication to identify a line of succession; it was simply that to do so formally would have been in direct conflict with their faith. For Benjamin to die before the time of the Ingathering would have caused serious theological problems. How could the Shiloh die before the Ingathering and the final judgment? For that matter, how could he die at all? Since the IHD believed in the eternal life of the body, the deaths of members before the time of the Ingathering were explained by saying that they simply had not been true in their faith. This rationalization obviously could not be applied to Benjamin; how could Shiloh, the man who embodied the faith, not be true to it? All of these questions were part of a big can of worms that the IHD did not care to open until it was absolutely necessary (i.e., until Benjamin actually did die).
This is not to say that they did not make informal provisions for what would happen if Benjamin died before the Ingathering took place. For many years, Mary had been playing an increasing role in the theology of the colony. It had long since been established that Benjamin and Mary between them were the seventh prophet, Shiloh Twain, and that she was Benjamin’s second in command when it came to colony affairs. With this system in place, it was tacitly accepted that upon Benjamin’s death, Mary would succeed him as the head of the colony, even though no formal line of succession was recognized. This would have worked out quite nicely if not for the intervention of the second issue affecting the IHD succession; the actions of Judge Harry T. Dewhurst.

Dewhurst was born and educated in Illinois, receiving his law degree from the University of Illinois. He moved his family to California hoping that the climate would be healthier for his son, who had asthma. While in California he became a judge. It was also in California that he first came across IHD literature. He was already a deeply religious man, and he was moved by the vision of life everlasting touted by the IHD. He visited the colony in 1919, and in 1920 he moved there with his family. Dewhurst brought a great deal of wealth to the colony. That, combined with his education and prestige, helped him to quickly become one of Benjamin’s favored followers, and he immediately began to rise through the ranks of the colony’s administration. His first clash with Mary came in 1921, when he replaced one of Mary’s allies, Francis Thorp, as the colony’s secretary. Only a year later Dewhurst struck directly at Mary, rewriting the colony’s by-laws to strip Mary of her financial power within the colony. During the 1927 trial several notes supposedly written by Benjamin were introduced into evidence. These
notes, like much of Benjamin’s writings were somewhat difficult to decipher, but they were claimed to be evidence that Benjamin had come to be distrustful of Mary and did not believe that she was true in her faith. When questioned about the notes in court, Benjamin (who was dying of tuberculosis at the time and had to be carried into court on a stretcher) was vague when it came to the meaning of the notes, while Mary’s contingent claimed that the notes were communications between Benjamin and Mary discussing some members of the office staff (Adkin 1990:201). The exact meaning of the notes has never been determined. After Benjamin’s death, Dewhurst seized on these notes as proof that Benjamin felt that Mary had lost her faith and would not have wanted her to carry on in his name. As previously stated this is the schism that eventually led to the splitting of the colony into the Dewhurst-led House of David and the Mary-led City of David in 1930 (Adkin 1990:212).

We cannot know what would have happened after Benjamin’s death had Dewhurst not been in the picture. While it seems that the failure of the entire colony to accept Mary as Benjamin’s heir was mostly due to Dewhurst’s actions, we cannot be sure. It may be that even without Dewhurst some simmering resentment towards Mary would have come to the surface after Benjamin’s death and that an anti-Mary faction headed by some other colonist would have emerged. For this reason it is hard to be certain whether the failure of the IHD to achieve a smooth succession was due to a lack of planning on the part of Benjamin, to the pressure of other factors at work in the dynamics of the colony, or both.
What is known is that for the IHD, as for so many other groups, institutionalization was a mixed blessing. It had many positive results. It allowed the colony to expand and to diversify its projects and business interests. It helped to deal with the difficult task of how to manage a large group of people all living together to the best advantage. Most importantly it allowed for the increased proselytizing that led to the rapid growth of the colony in the early days after it was founded. It also brought with it the negative consequences that invariably follow the growth and routinization of any religious group. The stratification of the members led to infighting. The increased economic activity led to all the usual stresses that come with having to manage money to the best advantage. Last, the issue of succession ultimately tore the group in half. While not all of the IHD’s problems can be blamed on the negative effects of institutionalization, it was a major factor. In the end, all of these factors played a role in the eventual down spiraling of the colony.
Chapter VI: Conclusion

The concept of the insularity feedback loop is an important addition to the understanding of how insularity is established and perpetuated within a religious group. By viewing insularity as a constantly evolving system driven by a positive feedback loop, we can better understand destabilization not as an isolated occurrence caused by a single event, but as the culmination of a cycle fed by many interconnected events.

Studying the evolution of the IHD from its inception through its years of growth and prosperity to its current state offers the opportunity to gain an understanding of a conversion and commitment process that differs from the standard models.

More importantly, by studying the process of institutionalization in the IHD, we gain a valuable insight as to why it was able to avoid the insularity feedback loop while other groups with similar origins have fallen victim to it. This new understanding of the insularity feedback loop, how it becomes established, grows, and finally destabilizes, is an important addition to our understanding of how religious groups evolve over time.
Notes

1 By inscrutable it is mean that what happens after death can’t be known by the living and therefore any claims made by religions as to what happens then can’t be verified. This is in contrast to millennial claims, the outcomes of which can be known by the living.

2 As of 2004 the Hutterites are widely believed to have the highest reliably reported fertility rate of any society (McQuillan 2004:51).

3 When the IHD was founded in 1903 the projected date for the start of the Ingathering was in 1916. This date was modified when it passed without the Ingathering coming to pass.

4 The infighting and eventual split of the original House of David colony after the death of Benjamin Purnell is discussed in detail in the section “The Trials and the Split.”

5 “The Seventh Church” is the Church founded by Benjamin Purnell, and it was to become almost fully encompassed by the House of David. The Seventh Church represented a combination of the Fifth (Wroeite) Church and the Sixth (Jezreelite) Church. A more comprehensive discussion of the Seventh Church is given in the section “The Theology of the House of David.”

6 Jesus, who was of pure birth, was the “Son of God.”

7 Pacifism was a central tenet of IHD theology and Israelite men were allowed to serve as non-combatants for religious reasons.

8 High Island is a small island in Lake Michigan where the IHD maintained a lumber camp starting in 1912. It is discussed in greater detail in the “Benjamin the Organizer” section.

9 While diffusion and migration are different processes, the existence of one does not preclude the existence of the other; they can co-exist.

10 Though Weber approaches charisma as more of the psychological state of being of a single person (the prophet), he also concedes that charisma must be socially validated to be function. Therefore, while a group cannot be said to have charisma apart from the prophet, the two can be seen to work as a whole, with the charisma of the prophet holding the group together and the group confirming the charisma of the prophet (Weber 1968).

11 The issue of how to discipline subordinates without alienating them is one occurs in all human systems of leadership, not just systems of leadership.
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