

## **The Rise and Fall of Prince Michael Mills and the Detroit Jezreelites**

*By Julieanna Frost*

For the first three decades of Michael Keyfor Mills's life, there was nothing that indicated a particularly remarkable individual or a future prophet. Michael K. Mills came into this world on June 19, 1856.<sup>1</sup> His parents were David and Thirza Mills of Elgin county, Ontario. When Mills was twenty-one years old, he married a local woman, Rosetta Close. Mills worked at a variety of odd jobs, often in optometry stores. The couple moved to Sarnia, Ontario, and then to Port Huron and Lexington in Michigan, and finally ended up in Detroit. They had at least two children together, though William Mills died at the age of five. When the Mills family lived in Detroit, Michael became acquainted with the religious teachings of James Jezreel and their lives would never be the same.

James Jezreel had claimed the mantle of the sixth messenger in the Christian Israelite faith. Though there are differences among the various Christian Israelite sects, all agree that the founder of this movement was Joanna Southcott (1750-1815). An elderly domestic servant from Devon, England, Southcott began to have visions and is reported to have had upwards of 10,000 followers during her lifetime.<sup>2</sup> Her death created a power vacuum, with various people vying for the leadership mantle of messenger. The movement splintered into several factions, each having divergent views of who were the authentic messengers after Southcott, as well as differences in religious practice. The proliferation of sects has been classified into categories such as Old Southcottians, Household of Faith, Shilohites, etc. The branch that Michael Mills followed acknowledged Joanna Southcott, Richard Brothers, George Turner, William Shaw, John Wroe, and James Jezreel as the true messengers.

The personal history of James Jezreel is murky. He had served in the 16th Regiment of the British army under the name of James White. He became attracted to Christian Israelite teachings and in 1875 briefly allied with the sect called The New House of Israel, before starting his own rival

group, The New and Latter House of Israel.<sup>3</sup> He began calling himself James Jershom Jezreel at this time. His followers bought out his contract with the military so he could stay with them in Chatham. In brief, this branch of the faith believed that Christians were in error by basically ignoring Old Testament law. Christian Israelites hoped to rectify this oversight by living by both law and gospel. They viewed themselves as Nazarites, and so prohibited the cutting of hair, the drinking of alcohol, the eating of non-kosher foods, and the use of tobacco. In 1878 a Jezreelite follower, Clarissa Rogers, traveled to the United States on a fundraising and missionary tour.<sup>4</sup> She was quite successful and Christian Israelite communities were started in several U.S. cities, including Chicago. In 1879, Jezreel published his work, *The Extracts of the Flying Roll*. He married Clarissa Rogers and they toured the United States together in 1880.<sup>5</sup>

It was during this trip that Grand Rapids convert Noah Drew provided the pair with “six wagons, a large marquee, and a hundred benches, and they toured the States like a travelling circus, pitching their tent outside town after town, and urging the inhabitants to hear Jezreel and Clarissa.... Converts were won and many dollars collected.”<sup>6</sup> In Michigan, notable Christian Israelite communities would eventually exist in Grand Rapids, Benton Harbor, and Detroit. In 1888, Michael Mills came across a copy of *The Flying Roll* and quickly became a believer. Mills began to sell Jezreel’s book door to door and preach on the faith. In 1891, three years after his original conversion experience, Mills claimed “to have undergone a physical change, in which he suffered great agony, and by which the evil was burned out of his body; that from that time he claimed to be, and his followers believed him to be, the Michael spoken of in the twelfth chapter of Daniel; that he believed himself to be divinely commissioned to gather the lost tribes of Israel.”<sup>7</sup> Mills gained a reputation as a healer and prophet, and gathered a group of followers around him. Although there are exaggerated claims of 1500 followers, no more than thirty lived in Detroit. The group turned its wealth over to Mills and he was able to purchase three homes north of the downtown on Hamlin Avenue.<sup>8</sup> Hamlin Avenue no longer exists in Detroit; it was renamed Bethune Avenue, reportedly due to the scandalous reputation the area had gained due to Mills and his followers. Mills called his colony the God House and was now referred to by the title of “Prince.”

Mills believed his mission was to gather the 144,000 elect from the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Mills proclaimed that ten of these tribes were in



Figure 1. Letterhead for the New Eve Stores and Bakery, part of the commercial arm of Mills's church, God House. (Courtesy of The Panacea Charitable Trust)

America with the remaining two in Great Britain. He had his own print shop at the God House and began to publish missionary literature, such as *Israel's Free Press of New Eve*, *New House*, and *Body of Israel*.<sup>9</sup> In January 1892, Mills traveled to the English village of James Jezreel to gather up the lost sheep of Gillingham, who had been without their official shepherd since Jezreel's death in 1885. Balleine reported that "the Trustees, instead of being impressed by having an Archangel among them, told him bluntly that he was suffering from a delusion. They would not even allow him to address one of their meetings. So he returned to Detroit."<sup>10</sup>

Though the British Jezreelites failed to notice his angelic state, the Jezreelites in Detroit viewed Mills as "an *inspired being*, as *God's instrument* ... [who] was incapable of wrong."<sup>11</sup> Within roughly a month, this belief would be put to an even greater test when Mills was accused of adultery and carnally knowing a girl between the ages of fourteen and sixteen. His accuser, Bernice Bickle, was fifteen years old at the time. She had arrived at the God House upon the request of Mills on December 21, 1891, from Sarnia, Ontario. Her parents were believers in the faith so when Mills wrote a letter to her parents asking for Bernice to come to colony headquarters, they did not hesitate. Mills also wrote to Bernice,

Well, dear Bernice, come to me. You are requested by the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to come and place yourself in obedience to Michael, my son, as the last piece is now found, and you are that piece, the tenth piece in the God-Head, obedience; thus saith the Lord God. Come with piano, music, dear one, as you remember the words: piano, with Bernice, to headquarters. "Thine, with love, thine; praise God, praise God, praise God."<sup>12</sup>

When Bernice arrived in Detroit, she lived in a home with Mills and seven other females. The residents at the colony by and large did not believe the charges against Mills, finding nothing unusual about the living arrangements at the God House because all were to be celibate according to their tenets. Instead they viewed this charge as a conspiracy, as a trumped up attempt by a hostile local community to get rid of the Christian Israelites. They claimed that their neighbors believed “the presence of these people in such large numbers affected the price of real estate in the part of the city where they resided; that a mass meeting of citizens was called to devise a means to rid the community of them.”<sup>13</sup> It does appear to be true that some in the neighborhood were not thrilled having a cult in their midst, as the homes of the God House were often pelted with rotten eggs and bricks.<sup>14</sup> It also appears that a neighbor complained that because there were not blinds on the windows of the colony, they saw a naked man and woman in the bathroom together, and worried for the underage children at the God House.<sup>15</sup> This actually launched the police investigation which ultimately led to criminal charges against Mills.

During this preliminary investigation, police discovered that Rosetta Mills was not living with her husband, Michael; instead she was staying a few blocks away with some friends. Her friends had encouraged her to make a complaint to the police against her husband for unlawful cohabitation, specifically with colony member Eliza Court. After much waffling on her part, Rosetta officially signed papers charging Mills with adultery on March 26, 1892.<sup>16</sup> Three days later police arrived at the God House with a warrant. Mills did not endear himself with the officers on that day. He attempted to delay the investigation in several ways, including reading selections from *Extracts of the Flying Roll* and making dire predictions. It was reported:

Detective Lombard was the only one of the officers who attracted Michael’s attention. The detective was informed by the Prince that as Mrs. Mills had betrayed her husband for 30 pieces of silver, so would he be served by Mrs. Lombard. The detective took exception to the statement and Michael raised his hands to heaven and prophesies the ruin of Lombard’s family, “Your wife shall leave you and your children shall desert you,” shouted the enthusiast.<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, Mills’s prophecies were cut short after this, and he with

several members of the colony were taken to the Fremont Street police station. While at the police station, Mills continued to obfuscate with the authorities who had brought him in for questioning. The following exchange was typical of Mills:

“Who are you,” Sgt. Thomas asked of the Prince. “I am the Christ,” was a reply. “Are you Michael K. Mills,” asks Thomas. “The Son of Man so call me,” retorted the long-haired prisoner. “How old are you,” was the next question propounded. “Before Abraham was I was,” solemnly repeated Michael, “In the flesh, however I am 35 years old.” “Your occupation?” “I am a natural genius. I’ve been a pattern maker, boilermaker, engineer and machinist. I can make anything from a watch to a steam engine,” was a reply. “Well I guess we’ll put you down as a carpenter,” said the Sergeant. “Yes you may, my elder brother worked at that trade and I succeed to all that was his. So it was foretold by the prophets. He was persecuted by the Hebrews. I am to be persecuted also, for am I not Michael, the second son?”<sup>18</sup>

Though grandiose, Mills’s tactics of vague answers may have worked as a way to keep his person out of jail; however, some of the female Christian Israelites brought in for questioning would ultimately give specific evidence against Mills.

Six females were locked up in the Woodbridge and Fremont Street police stations: Bernice Bickle, May Webster, Alice Court, Eliza Court, Carrie Bendry, and Emma Butler. From information gleaned from multiple interviews, particularly from Bernice Bickle and May Webster, Mills was charged with adultery, carnal knowledge of a girl between fourteen and sixteen (Bernice Bickle), and lewd cohabitation (Eliza Court). Both Mills and Eliza Court were arraigned on March 30 before Judge Howell. The *Detroit Free Press* gives the following account of the exchange between Mills and the judge at the arraignment:

“Honored brother, I wish to say that I am willing to bear with everything as God gives me strength. Brother I ...”

“That is not the question Mr. Mills. Are you or are you not guilty of this offense,” interrupted Justice Howell.

“I will say that I’ve never lived carnally with any other woman except my wife since my marriage. I will bear with everything that against me for the glory of God. Glory Be to God.”



Figure 2. Michael Mills. (Courtesy of The Panacea Charitable Trust)

“This isn’t the time for prosecution, Mr. Mills. I’ll enter a plea of not guilty in your case.”<sup>19</sup>

The newspaper report continues with an account of the exchange upon the reading of the second charge:

“Brother I’m willing to bear all and just things. I know not of these carnal relations.”

“Please say guilty or not guilty to this charge,” commanded his honor.

“I will leave everything with you brother,” was the only reply.

“It is not a question of choice of me, but a matter of duty,” retorted the justice. A plea of not guilty was entered.<sup>20</sup>

The third charge involved both Court and Mills. The *Detroit Free Press* reports that Court “declared that she was unwilling to justify herself. Michael replied in the same vein as in the two preceding charges, and not guilty was written before their names.”<sup>21</sup> Bail was set at \$1700 for Mills and \$200 for Court. It was unexpected by the court, but both were able to post bond on April 6th and return to the God House to await their trials.<sup>22</sup>

“Prince” Mills received more unfortunate news that month, when his wife of fourteen years, Rosetta, sued for separation due to adultery and cruelty. She claimed that Mills would often restrain her so that he could more easily have illicit trysts with female colony members. Mills explained to the judge that “the reason why Mrs. Mills was tied up was that she had threatened to do him great bodily injury, and the only course open to him under the circumstances was to hand her over to the police or restrain her privately. He chose the latter.”<sup>23</sup> He also made the assertion that the real reason his wife had made such accusations was that she had been bribed with money.<sup>24</sup>

Given the charged atmosphere in Detroit around this case, and realizing the likelihood of a fair trial in Wayne County was low given the sensational media attention, Mills’s attorney, John Atkinson, requested a change of venue on May 3rd,<sup>25</sup> which Judge Chambers granted on May 17th. His ruling in part stated, “Because of a prejudiced state of public opinion condemning him, both on account of personal feeling and a prejudice against the so-called religious order he claims to represent. And no affidavits appearing to the contrary I am inclined to the opinion that the best interest of the people, as well as of the defendant, will be served by transferring this case to another court of like jurisdiction.”<sup>26</sup> The case, *The People v. Michael K. Mills* was heard forty-three miles away in Ann Arbor, the county seat of Washtenaw County. One of the prosecuting attorneys, Mr. Springer, did not pursue the adultery charge. He was blindsided by a request of Rosetta Mills to discontinue her case against Mills. She wrote a note entering a *nolle prosequi* in the court records, “because I was coerced into making it, believing as I did that unless I did make the complaint personal violence would be done to the respondent.”<sup>27</sup> She may have feared for the safety of the father of her children, but it may have been that Rosetta Mills just did not want any more to do with Mills and his legal mess. She had returned to Canada and would not be present for his trial. The Millses’ divorce was finalized on August 20.<sup>28</sup> It is also likely that without the cooperation of Rosetta, the prosecutors realized the charge





Figure 3. Eliza Court. (Courtesy of The Panacea Charitable Trust)

of lewd cohabitation would be more difficult to prove against Mills and Court. They would only proceed with the indictment of Mills for carnal knowledge of a girl between fourteen and sixteen.

The trial began on June 15th in Judge Kinne's court at 9 a.m. The first witness for the prosecution was Bernice Bickle, aged fifteen years. She verified that the statements that she had made against Mills were accurate, though she was not asked to give particulars in open court. The prosecution pointed out that eight females lived at the headquarters of the God House with Mills, noting, "There are four beds in the house. It is unnecessary to go into the disgusting details of what took place in this abode."<sup>29</sup> This reticence may have been to shield the jury given the sensibilities of the time. It may have been in part to protect Bickle, whose parents were in the



courtroom as supporters of Mills. The defense had no such qualms and attacked Bickle as being immoral from her childhood. Atkinson argued that Bickle was unchaste and thus untrustworthy. Bickle had been sexually molested by teenagers when she was a child. She testified, "Six or seven years ago I had to do with a boy named Elias Jones, because he threatened me that the 'Boo-man' would catch me, and also my brother Frank coaxed me several times."<sup>30</sup>

The second witness was May Webster, aged twenty-seven. She had been a follower of Mills for approximately four years. She reported that she had lied to protect Mills in the past. She also verified the unusual sleeping arrangements.

She knew of her [Bickle] occupying a room with Prince Michael. Eliza Court told Bernice to come into bed in a small room where witness afterwards heard Michael and heard him talking. Other times witness knew of Bernice occupying a room with the Prince, was on the 19th, 20th, and 21st of last February. She made up the bed where they had slept. Bernice and Michael stayed in the room after Eliza Court, who slept with them, had risen.<sup>31</sup>

The defense brought up the fact that in the past Webster had defended Mills. Webster responded that "she canvassed for the Flying Roll for three years. She said that the book was regarded as a book of high authority among the New Israelites. She believed in it then, but does not believe in it so much now. She was out of the power of those people now, and she had changed her beliefs."<sup>32</sup> On redirect, Webster "stated that about a week before the arrest Prince Michael called them all into a room and told them that they might be called upon to testify in court, and not to acknowledge that they had known him carnally or otherwise; that they didn't know him carnally, as he was only here in spirit, and if it was carnal on their part and death to them."<sup>33</sup>

The third witness was a surprise to the defense, in that a former member of God House, Ella Rowlandson, had returned from Canada to testify against Mills. She had been forcibly removed from the colony by her father and she also verified that she had slept with Mills. The defense attempted to discredit Rowlandson claiming that what she and others were doing amounted to religious persecution. Next Detroit Police Chief Starkweather gave his account of his interview with Mills after his arrest. Starkweather related that Mills in regards to Bernice Bickle "refused to

affirm or deny it and said that he was not responsible to anybody for what he did with those girls: he was under a supreme power.”<sup>34</sup> The defense had no real questions of this witness, but vehemently objected to not being notified beforehand that Starkweather would testify. Attorney Springer apologized that it must have been a clerical error. After supper, Atkinson began his cross-examination and “attempted to show that the police department works in conjunction with real estate dealers and merchants in the affinity of Michael’s time and persecuting Mills for private purposes, and not for public, and that the story was concocted.”<sup>35</sup>

Witnesses called by the defense included Detective Lombard, Captain Starkweather, Ella Rowlandson, one former co-worker, two former bosses, and current God House member, Emma Butler. In my view, Attorney Atkinson did not help his client and quite possibly hurt him with his defense tactics. He continued to insinuate that the police had framed Mills with no evidence. He asked Rowlandson if she had been chaste before arriving at God House, which caused a harsh reprimand from the Judge. In addition the men he called to testify who used to work with Mills had not been in contact with Mills for years. Emma Butler claimed that there was no truth to the testimony of Bernice Bickle, May Butler, and Ella Rowlandson; however on cross-examination her trustworthiness came into question when it came out that she had lied about receiving questionable messages from Mills like the following, “Dear ones – 2000 years ago when I ministered to the body of Christ, I forgave the woman taken in the act of adultery, and now you can do the same by holding your piece and the being that is without sin, let him cast the first stone.”<sup>36</sup> Mills did not take the stand in his own defense.

Closing arguments took place the next day. On June 17th, the judge gave his instructions to the jury. It took them only one hour to come back with their verdict—guilty. Judge Kinne asked Mills if he had anything to say before sentencing. Mills replied, “By the strength of God I will bear whenever is inflicted upon me.”<sup>37</sup> The judge imposed the maximum sentence of five years to be served at the Michigan State Prison in Jackson. Patterned on the Auburn system, the oldest penal institution in the state, with its fortress-like architecture, it had individual cells for prisoners, with inmates assigned work groups during the day.<sup>38</sup> Joseph Dailey had been serving as interim leader of the God House during the trial proceedings, but with a longer absence facing him, Mills now needed someone who had an unwavering faith in him to oversee the colony.

In early October, Mills requested that Eliza Court visit him at the prison and to bring a marriage license with her. She had visited him two times previously at Jackson. It is uncertain as to the true nature of their relationship, though he often referred to her as his “spiritual affinity.” Court was thirteen years older than Mills, worked most of her life as a domestic servant, and was described as “homely.”<sup>39</sup> They did regularly share a bed together at the God House, as had come out in testimony. It may have been a strategic marriage because Mills had expressed concerns about the future of the property in Detroit.<sup>40</sup> When asked about the license



Figure 4. Michael Mills. (Courtesy of The Panacea Charitable Trust)

by the press, Court replied that “she had simply brought the document in accordance with the order of the Prince, and it was intended to be used in case of an emergency, as that of the possible granting to the Prince of a new trial, which is profoundly hoped for by Mills and his would-be spouse.”<sup>41</sup> Though Mills and Court told the media that they did not wed,<sup>42</sup> according to Michigan marriage records, Mills and Court married on October 8, 1892.<sup>43</sup> Census records in 1894 of the inmates of Jackson State Prison also indicate that Mills was a married man.<sup>44</sup> With Court as his wife, Mills could continue to exert some control over the colony and its members. What is certain is that Court proved to be a very loyal supporter of her Prince; she would do anything for him.

In the immediate aftermath of Mills’s conviction, many of the assertions of his defense team did not come to pass. There is no evidence of civil cases seeking financial damages against Mills, and the God House was not driven from Detroit as predicted. It is not unusual in light of Mills’s crimes that some of his followers lost the faith. Another contingent remained Christian Israelites, but left for another colony. The *Detroit News* perhaps best sums up the fate of this splinter group:

The troubles of the Flying Rollers were not ended when they fled to Windsor, for suddenly there appeared among them a majestic looking woman of unusual ability, who proceeded with another exploitation. She assumed the title of Queen Esther. This woman made one of the men of the colony her chief aid and abettor, with the result that another family was broken up. After the colony had been well mulcted by this woman she was identified as the most notorious woman adventurer and blackmailer of her time, for she proved to be none other than the mysterious person of unknown origin, known as Ann Odelia Dis Debar.<sup>45</sup>

There remained a small group that stayed committed to Mills and the God House. Even with the notoriety, some even joined this colony after Mills went to prison, most notably the Purnell family. Benjamin Purnell became a pillar at God House but stated that he never knew Mills personally.<sup>46</sup> Purnell was unsure of the exact date of his arrival in Detroit with his wife and two children, but they were definitely living at the God House by 1893.<sup>47</sup> Those at the God House were convinced that Mills was innocent and hoped that he would be exonerated and released soon.

Mills’s case was appealed to the Michigan Supreme Court, but his

conviction was upheld in the January session of 1893. Undaunted, Eliza Court and Emma Butler appeared before the Michigan Advisory Board of Pardons in 1894 to speak favorably in Mills's behalf. Parole was denied by the board.<sup>48</sup> In 1895, Court and members of the God House began to circulate a petition in Detroit requesting a pardon of Mills.

Though such legal maneuverings were unsuccessful, Court oversaw the colony in Mills's stead with few difficulties. She was recognized as being Mills's confidant and right-hand person. This relative tranquillity lasted until February 1895. It was at this time that Court announced Mills a king, and she his queen. More problematic, she announced a new rule in the colony in which males and females would be paired off by Court to live together, including male and female children. Some members of the colony strongly objected to this command. This change, which I personally believe was instigated by Mills,<sup>49</sup> led to a schism. An eleven year old girl, Ethel Stoneman, with the aid of her brother was able to escape from the God House.<sup>50</sup> She reported that Court had paired her up to live with thirteen year old Coy Purnell<sup>51</sup> and she had done so for several weeks chastely prior to her absconding. A little over a month later Benjamin and Mary Purnell received what they termed the spiritual graft, making them the seventh messengers. Mary later recalled this event:

It brings to my mind so many sweet remembrances of our travels in our labors of love under the guidance of that one immortal spirit, Shiloh Emmanuel, who came on time to bring forth the closing part of the message of life. And I tell you for a truth, they were happy, happy days to me, to think that we were found worthy to be called and chosen by God himself to be the true strangers and pilgrims upon the earth, thus going forth from place to place with this wonderful message of life.<sup>52</sup>

It has been surmised that it was this anointing that caused tension between Court and the Purnells, leading the Purnells to leave the God House. However, it is just as likely that the new edict was the final straw for the Purnells to decide to leave and set out on their own ministry. Purnell family lore has indicated that the Purnells did not like their children being manipulated by those at the God House.<sup>53</sup>

Mills was released from prison June 19, 1896. It was later reported that he was released early on stipulation that he leave the United States.<sup>54</sup> Mills had mainly worked in the prison tailor shop during his confinement. Upon

his release, one of the areas of greatest interest to the press was his future marriage to Eliza Court, being unaware that they had already married years ago. The *Detroit Free Press* unquestioning gave Mills's explanation, "This happy event did not occur in Jackson because of the dilatory methods of a Chicago button house. Prince had no buttons on his new coat and couldn't get married without them, and for this disappointment he led the responsibility at the door of the Chicago button house, and not filling an order placed with some weeks ago."<sup>55</sup> Mills did not give a future date for the nuptials. When asked as to his next move by reporters, Mills replied,

The story of what I was doing in Jackson is an old story and not worth repeating I will stay in Detroit some days but eventually think of moving to Sarnia. My course, however is much like that of a small boy who has to go wherever he is sent. There are powers above me and I must abide by their commands. I will go to Hamilton Avenue today and will not think of doing much work until I am thoroughly rested.<sup>56</sup>

After he rested for a while, however, Mills abandoned the idea of leaving for Canada and instead decided to focus on rebuilding the God House in Detroit. Mills put Eliza in charge of a women's auxiliary for the colony in recognition of her faithful service. Unfortunately for him and Court, the attempt to rebuild the organization was not successful. Not only did his status as a felon hurt him, but he also had competition from an up-and-coming Christian Israelite community.

The Purnells had traveled as itinerant preachers for seven years and by 1902 started their own small Christian Israelite colony in Fostoria, Ohio. They relocated to Benton Harbor, Michigan, in 1903 and called their community the House of David. The Purnells never brought up Mills's sex scandal to discredit him, but they did publish several pamphlets that refuted his status as a leader, indicating that he was a deceiver.<sup>57</sup> The House of David grew quickly and soon was the largest Christian Israelite community in the state, with 385 members by 1907,<sup>58</sup> a population of the elect that Mills never came close to gathering together.

In 1905, Mills made the decision to attempt once again to lead the British Christian Israelites; this may have been influenced by the fact that currently he was not having much luck with the American Christian Israelites. He left with his wife and a few followers for Gillingham, England.

They decided to squat in James Jezreel's old house, calling the community by various names, such as the New Eve, the New House, or Body of Israel, and the Church of the Firstborn.<sup>59</sup> He was able to convince some Christian Israelites there of his prophet status and that he was the seventh messenger. Mills even went so far as to propose finishing what became called Jezreel's Tower. This grand building was a temple planned by Jezreel. When Jezreel died, his widow Clarissa, aka "Queen Esther," hoped to finish the building but financial difficulties and her untimely death precluded this goal. Clarissa's father determined that it was necessary to take legal steps against Mills, in that "the founder's father-in-law, Edward Rogers, who had rented the place as a wholesale grocery warehouse, opposed him and secured an injunction against members of the sect who had supported the idea."<sup>60</sup> It appears as if most in the neighborhood just viewed Mills and his hangers-on as harmless eccentrics.

Mills ran afoul of the law at least one more time while in England, when he was charged with the assault of William Worrall. Worrall had rented space in a building owned by Mills to run a dance academy. Worrall made the mistake of taking down some religious literature hanging in a common area, believing it to be inappropriate in his school. When Mills discovered this he began to pummel Worrall while another Christian Israelite beat the dance teacher with a stick. Mills was brought before the Chatham Stipendiary and fined the substantial fee of forty shillings plus court costs.<sup>61</sup> In just a little over ten years, Mills died at the age of sixty-two. Upon his departure, once again some left the faith and the others joined the Panacea Society, another Christian Israelite sect centered in Bedford, England.<sup>62</sup>

Though Mills's colony in England lasted longer and the God House of Detroit only existed for thirteen years, I believe that the Detroit Jezreelites had a greater long-term impact upon the faith. Mills is a controversial figure at best, and he was an abject failure in his goal of gathering the 144,000. However, given these shortcomings, it is still impressive that he was able to keep control of the God House while incarcerated. His charisma and his calculated trust in Eliza Court helped him to maintain the colony. More importantly, the God House fostered the development of arguably the two most influential American Christian Israelite leaders, Benjamin and Mary Purnell. Though God House and the road on which it once stood has been erased from the maps, and few recall Prince Michael Mills, his legacy did make a difference to the Christian Israelite faith.



## Notes

1. "Michigan Marriages, 1868-1925," index and images, Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/N3JG=2WP>; accessed 22 February 2013), Michael K. Mills and Eliza Court, October 8, 1892.
2. G. R. Balleine, *Past Finding Out: The Tragic Story of Joanna Southcott and her Successors* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956), ix.
3. *Ibid.*, 114-15.
4. *Ibid.*, 118.
5. *Ibid.*, 119.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Michigan Circuit Court: Washtenaw, *The People v. Michael K. Mills*, 634. James White Library, Andrews University.
8. *Polk's Detroit City Directory* (Detroit: R. L. Polk, 1893), 971.
9. "Curly Haired Prince Bossed Colony of Detroit Cultists," *Detroit Free Press*, May 13, 1952.
10. Balleine, 122-23.
11. *The People v. Michael K. Mills*, 637.
12. *Ibid.*, 633.
13. *Ibid.*, 634.
14. "Flying Roller Cult Head Dies," *Detroit Free Press*, January 23, 1922.
15. "Convict Mike," *Detroit Free Press*, June 18, 1892.
16. "The Law's Strong Arm," *Detroit Free Press*, March 29, 1892.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. "Prince Michael's Picture," *Detroit Free Press*, May 31, 1892.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. "Back at the Colony," *Detroit Free Press*, April 7, 1892.
23. "'Prince' Michael Mills's Case," *New York Times*, April 3, 1892.
24. "The Law's Strong Arm."
25. "A Change of Venue Wanted," *Detroit Free Press*, May 4, 1892.
26. "A Change of Venue," *Detroit Free Press*, May 18, 1892.
27. *Ibid.*
28. "Wayne Circuit Jurors," *Detroit Free Press*, August 21, 1892.
29. *The People v. Michael K. Mills*, 633.
30. *Ibid.*, 639.
31. "A Motley Crowd," *Detroit Free Press*, June 16, 1892.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*

36. Ibid.
37. "Convict Mike."
38. Willis Dunbar and George May, *Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 454.
39. "A 'Flying Roll' Order," *Elmira Telegram*, February 3, 1895.
40. "'Prince' Michael Mills's Case."
41. "Will Not Wed at Present," *Detroit Free Press*, October 11, 1892.
42. Court continued to use her birth name for the press until after Mills got out of prison.
43. "Michigan Marriages, 1868-1925."
44. Michigan State Census Records, 1884-1894. Archives of Michigan.
45. "Death Recalls 'Holy Rollers,'" *Detroit News*, January 23, 1922.
46. Clare Adkin, *Brother Benjamin: A History of the Israelite House of David* (Benton Harbor: Privately published, 1990), 12.
47. *Polk's Detroit City Directory*, 971.
48. Michigan Advisory Board of Pardons, Report of the Proceedings of the Advisory Board (Lansing: Robert Smith and Company, 1894), 42.
49. There is no pattern of Court ever doing an action without Mills's approval. I find it highly unlikely that this was her decision alone. Also the fact that Court was rewarded with her own auxiliary after Mills got out of prison could indicate this was for her loyal service to him.
50. "A 'Flying Roll' Order."
51. Adkin, 343.
52. Mary Purnell, A Letter from Home, #54, March 12, 1934. Hamilton College, Burke Library, Special Collections.
53. Hettie Purnell, Interview with Chris Siriano. Videotape recording. Benton Harbor, 2007. Hamilton College, Burke Library, Special Collections.
54. "Out of Prison," *Detroit Free Press*, June 20, 1896.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid.
57. See House of David publications *The Sword of the Spirit of the House of David*, *Book of Dialogues* (Dialogue #33).
58. Adkin, 23.
59. Balleine, 123.
60. Charles Harper, *The Dover Road: Annals of an Ancient Turnpike* (Hartford: Edwin Valentine Mitchell, 1922), 140.
61. "Prince Michael," *Western Times*, September 10, 1912.
62. Kenneth Newport and Crawford Gribben, eds., *Expecting the End: Millennialism in the Social and Historical Context* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 224.