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Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters With Judaism

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Introduction

Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch

*B*BLACK ZION GROWS out of a joint interest in religious diversity and a deep concern over the absence of religion in conversations involving blacks and Jews in American society. This book addresses shared elements in black and Jewish sacred life, as well as the development and elaboration of new religious identities by African Americans. These essays explore the creative ways that African Americans have interacted with Jewish beliefs, Jewish traditions, and Jewish institutions. Black religious encounters with Judaism—and the contexts and circumstances that have shaped these encounters—have produced a spectrum of forms that are as varied and complex as the religious experience itself.

Black Zion does not purport to be a book on “black–Jewish relations” as social scientists, academics, and politicians currently use that phrase. Nor is it particularly concerned with African American and Jewish “dialogues” or “alliances,” which, in our opinion, are paradigms with limited use for comprehending the interactions between the two groups. Indeed, such paradigms may actually obscure a better understanding of the historical relationship between African Americans and Jews. Rather than focus our discussion on dialogues and alliances or, conversely, on any disappointment and anger between blacks and Jews, we seek to explore the critical role of religion in defining and shaping the relationship between the two peoples.¹

Blacks have encountered Jewish traditions in myriad forms and under a number of historical circumstances. Until now, studies concerned with African American religions and Judaism have dealt primarily with the theological impact of biblical texts on black Christian traditions and, to a lesser degree, on the emergence of “black Jewish” groups in the United States.² While these subjects are also given consideration in this text, they do not begin to exhaust the wealth of African American religious encounters with Judaism. There is no normative model, no typical relationship between African American religions and Judaism. Because African Americans have had such a rich and complex relationship with Jewish traditions, the essays in this volume employ a wide variety of methodological approaches drawn from a number of disciplines, including cultural studies, theology, anthropology, sociology, and the history of religions. They offer new possibilities for viewing black American religious institutions, faith traditions, and life experiences. Nevertheless, the

volume—despite its wide selection of essays—still represents a suggestive sample rather than an exhaustive survey.

Although the essays in *Black Zion* address the ways in which African American religions have interacted with Jewish traditions, texts, and spaces, this does not mean that Jewish groups and individuals have been unaffected by their contact with African American religious culture. In some cases the impact has been quite dramatic, as Susannah Heschel illustrates in her essay on her father, Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr., profoundly affected both men's religious thinking. Indeed, many Jewish individuals and congregations were spiritually transformed by their involvement in the civil rights movement and by the African American religious leaders who were at its vanguard. There are also numerous African American Jews whose religious identities have been shaped by their participation in both cultures, as Bernard Wolfson shows in his essay on the Alliance of Black Jews and Rabbi Capers Funnye. In other cases, such as that of the Hebrew Israelites, a sect of black Americans who emigrated to Israel in 1969, religious influences on Jews may be more difficult to detect or may become more apparent with time, but at least one Israeli Jew has already become a member of the group. The Hebrew Israelites are examined by Merrill Singer and Ethan Michaeli in two separate chapters. Notwithstanding these examples, it may be argued that the undeniably powerful influence of African American culture on Jewish groups and individuals occurs less in the realm of religious beliefs and practice and more in the realms of secular culture, political activism, and ethnic identity construction.

By concentrating on the ways in which African Americans have encountered Judaism, we do not mean to imply that Judaism has had a greater impact on African American religiosity than have Christianity, Islam, or African traditional religions. Rather we hope to illuminate one thread in the intricate tapestry of black religious experiences by exploring the manifold and ingenious ways in which African Americans have incorporated Judaism into their religious identities.

As we have indicated, *Black Zion* is not specifically about black-Jewish relations—or at least in the way those relations have traditionally been understood. Previous works have typically focused on the social and political relationship between the two groups while almost totally ignoring the religious dimension. *Black Zion*, by contrast, places religion at its center, thereby illuminating an obscured—but critically significant—area of black-Jewish encounters in America. For example, Nathaniel Deutsch's essay on the Nation of Islam treats the group as first and foremost a religious movement whose political and social activism grows out of a complex religious ideology—one espoused in the group's own sacred texts. Examining the writings and speeches of two critical figures in the movement's history, Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan, Deutsch presents a picture of the ambivalence of the Nation of Islam's thought regarding Judaism, which is expressed alternately, in social condemnation and spiritual identification. Without an appreciation of the religious significance of the Nation of Islam's mythology and scriptural interpreta-

tion, he argues, an informed understanding of their attitudes toward Jews and Judaism is impossible.

The paucity of studies on the religious dimension of black–Jewish relations in America is particularly striking, and egregious, given the critical importance of religion to both communities. In part this neglect reflects an unfortunate tendency of some academics and intellectuals to overlook the vital role of religion in American culture. Generally, when religion does receive attention by writers, coverage focuses on mainstream groups and denominations, while smaller or lesser-known groups are disregarded, unless they are perceived to be dangerous or deviant, as with the case of David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco. This lack of appreciation for religion in the lives of ordinary Americans has had devastating effects, as Waco also illustrates. If people had made greater efforts to understand the religious beliefs and motivations of the Branch Davidians, instead of treating the situation as a “secular” hostage standoff, unnecessary bloodshed might have been avoided. Only recently has scholarly interest turned to an appreciation of the power of religion in Americans’ lives, particularly as it shapes popular opinion and civic behavior.³

We believe that there is another important reason why the religious aspects of black–Jewish relations have received such scant attention. The dominant view (at times promulgated by social scientists, academic writers, and the media) is that relations between the two groups are in crisis. In examining black–Jewish relations, it is important to avoid what the historian Salo Baron called a “lachrymose” view of history. Baron was referring to the tendency among Jewish historians to focus entirely on the negative episodes in Jewish history rather than presenting a well-rounded picture. Because of the traumatic events in both African American and Jewish history, a lachrymose perspective is easy to adopt. Yet this historiographical method obscures the positive experiences of both peoples, including the constructive interactions that they have shared.⁴

Ironically, the “crisis view” of black–Jewish relations is also problematic in that it suggests that a halcyon period once existed between the two groups. In fact, along with the positive and neutral exchanges, there have always been tensions in the joint social and political endeavors of African Americans and Jews. From the establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) at the start of the twentieth century to the contemporary civil rights struggle, some African Americans have welcomed the participation of Jews while others have viewed Jewish involvement as patronizing at best and self-serving at worst—a view espoused by Malcolm X in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*:

I gave the Jew credit for being among all other whites the most active, and the most vocal, financier, “leader” and “liberal” in the Negro civil rights movement. But I said at the same time that the Jew played these roles for a very careful strategic reason: the more prejudice in America could be fo-

cused upon the Negro, then the more the white Gentiles' prejudice would keep diverted off the Jew.⁵

In this statement, Malcolm X, a Muslim, expresses a deep suspicion of Jews' intentions vis-à-vis blacks, as well as an acute awareness that historically, Jews, like blacks, have been marginalized in relation to "white Gentile" society. His words capture an important element of the paradoxical relationship of blacks and Jews in America, one in which accusation and identification have gone hand in hand. It is within the religious realm that the most intense identification of blacks with Jews has occurred.

The essays in this collection illustrate the fluid nature of cultural categories as well as the shifting meanings of race and ethnicity in the historical experiences of the African American people. By exploring the ways in which blacks have identified with and as Jews *religiously*, this book problematizes the very category of "black-Jewish relations" insofar as this term implies a dichotomous relationship. As the essays in this volume dramatically indicate, "black" and "Jewish" are not mutually exclusive. Many individuals and communities in the United States have embraced both identities.

Although this book focuses on African American religions, it also raises important questions for the meaning of Judaism. Certainly one of the most vexing of these questions is whether one can even speak of a single Judaism. In fact, it may be argued that the popular image of a unified Judaism does not accurately reflect any historical period, let alone our own. Scholars increasingly refer to "Judaisms" when they discuss the religious landscape of 2,000 ago. Closer to the present, the rise of Hasidism and the Reform movement both triggered great controversy and changes within the body of Judaism. Despite a few notable but ultimately unsuccessful attempts to create a Jewish creed or dogma, Jews—unlike Christians and Muslims—have traditionally eschewed a set of defining beliefs. As the millennium draws to a close, the question of "Who is a Jew?" has become a lightning rod for debate. The identification of African Americans with and especially *as* Jews expands the parameters of this debate and highlights issues of race, ethnicity, and self-definition in determining who is a Jew.

If a group of African Americans who were raised as Christians form a new community and declare themselves to be Jews, does this act make them Jewish? Must they first be converted by one of the "official" branches of Judaism? Are these branches any more valid than another group that claims Jewish origins? Moreover, what about a group of African Americans who claims that they are legitimately Jewish and that others who call themselves Jews (i.e., Orthodox, Conservative, etc.) are imposters or "so-called Jews"? Finally, what happens when a group of African Americans who identify with biblical Israel but reject the label "Jews" as inaccurate emigrate to the modern state of Israel and establish a community? These scenarios, far

from being heuristic, are part of the current reality in America and Israel and are explored by the contributors to *Black Zion*.

For some African Americans, identification with the biblical nation of Israel has assumed allegorical or metaphorical significance; other blacks have considered themselves to be the only true physical descendants of Israel; still others have affirmed their connection to ancient Israel as members of the Jewish community. Thus it is important to distinguish between those groups and individuals who identify with the biblical Israel and those who identify with contemporary Jews, although there is some overlap.

Several essays in this volume examine a cross-section of African American groups and individuals that embrace some form of Jewish or Hebrew/Israelite identity. Yvonne Chireau's essay investigates the religious and historical developments that culminated in the genesis of black Jewish groups at the turn of this century. Chireau shows how the earliest groups combined Christian rituals and symbols with Jewish traditions, such as a Saturday Sabbath and Passover celebrations, and later some African Americans were more directly influenced by their contact with Jews of European background. By contrast, black Hebrew groups such as the Commandment Keepers Congregation of Harlem, currently the largest African American Jewish community in New York City, claimed an organic relationship to the Jews of Ethiopia, the *Beta Yisroel*.⁶

Those African Americans who identify as Jews present a particularly striking challenge to the American notion of what constitutes Jewish culture and ethnicity, and they form part of a broader contemporary awakening within both Jewish and non-Jewish communities to the wide variety of Jewish experiences. By their very existence, African American Jews also undermine the image of Jews as a race unto themselves or as belonging to a single race, be it white, Semitic, or Asiatic. Bernard Wolfson's essay illuminates a very different but equally important group of African Americans: those who identify as members of the larger Jewish community. Some have a Jewish and an African American parent while others have converted to Judaism; some belong to predominantly African American congregations, others identify with the Orthodox movement. Wolfson also examines the Alliance of Black Jews, a group whose mission statement is "to bring together people of African descent who believe in Torah and its mandates and/or who are culturally affiliated with Judaism."

Although Jews have generally avoided defining Judaism by a single creed or dogma, for millennia they have drawn inspiration and strength from a common set of religious themes, rituals, and beliefs. These include identification as the chosen people of Israel, a reverence for the Law, and belief in a covenantal relationship with God. Occupying an equally important place in the history of the Jewish people and their religious imagination are the concepts of exile and redemption. In the Jewish tradition, chosenness, Law, Covenant, Exile, and Redemption all originate in the

Hebrew Bible. It is therefore no accident that Jews in all periods and places have employed biblical exegesis as a primary means for self-understanding and self-renewal. Several essays in this volume focus on the constructive use of biblical interpretation in black religious cultures. Allan Callahan examines the significance of the book of Nehemiah to contemporary African American Christians. He begins by tracing the exegetical history of Nehemiah in ancient Jewish sources. Ultimately, Callahan argues, Nehemiah was almost forgotten by Jewish exegetes and by the African American slaves who created the tradition of the spirituals. Callahan shows how in the past two decades black Christian leaders such as John Perkins and Johnny Ray Youngblood have recovered the postexilic book of Nehemiah and drawn inspiration from its message of community restoration.

In his essay, Nathaniel Deutsch explores the attitudes of Elijah Muhammad and Louis Farrakhan toward Jews and Judaism, illuminating a profound structural affinity between Muhammad's biblical exegesis and the style of rabbinic biblical interpretation known as *midrash*. Both Muhammad and the Rabbis employed ingenious and imaginative methods of biblical interpretation as a form of resistance to religious and political oppression, transforming biblical exegesis into a powerful tool for self-definition and affirmation. The use of *midrashic*-type exegesis is also a distinctive characteristic of the Holy Tabernacle Ministries (also known as Nubian Islaamic Hebrews/Ansaaru Allah). Kathleen Malone O'Connor reveals the ways in which the group's leader, Malachi Z. York, employs biblical interpretation—informed by his knowledge of Semitic languages—to define the group's worldview. O'Connor places the Holy Tabernacle Ministries within the historical context of African American Muslim (Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths) and Jewish (Moorish Zionist Temple, Commandment Keepers, Hebrew Israelites) groups. Her analysis of the movement's history reveals how the Holy Tabernacle Ministries has combined Muslim, Jewish, and Christian elements, sometimes emphasizing one heritage, sometimes another, according to the changing orientation of their leader.

The roots of African American identification with, and transformation of, Israelite and Jewish traditions are to be found in the central narrative of the Hebrew Bible: a lowly people is chosen by God, suffers slavery and exile, and is ultimately redeemed and returned to its Promised Land. This story resonated profoundly with the African slaves and their descendants who cried by the rivers of their own Babylon—America—during centuries of oppression and exile. Blacks have consistently offered their own liberatory exegesis of biblical traditions by emphasizing the chosenness of African Americans and the promise of redemption for their suffering.

The various modes of black identification with Judaism and Jewish texts share a critically important element: they all subvert the racist image of blacks as a damned people, an image cultivated over the years by white religious figures employing scriptural justification for slavery and other forms of racist oppression. In her essay, Elizabeth McAlister explores a fascinating variation of this phenomenon in which

practitioners of Haitian Vodou symbolically assume the role of Jews vis-à-vis Catholics in order to subvert the latter group's religious authority. As McAlister writes: "When Rara members [Vodou practitioners and participants in the seasonal festival of Lent] embrace the negative cultural category of the Jew, the mythology they generate may be understood as a repressed people's subversion of the ruling order. This class resistance to Catholic hegemony is a form of theatrical positioning on the part of the peasants that says 'We are the Jews, the enemy of the French Catholic landowners.'"

In addition to identification—whether metaphorical or literal—with biblical Israel or Jews, many African Americans have also transformed particular Jewish traditions, symbols, and rituals. Other essays in this volume consider a wide variety of these transformations. Karla Goldman examines the mental reconfiguration of Jewish symbols and architecture by African American Christians. The theme of constructing community is central to her discussion of black congregations that have moved into former synagogues on Cincinnati's Reading Road. Goldman draws upon interviews as well as her own architectural observations of these sacred spaces. She examines how members of several congregations, Jewish and African American, have interpreted the transition from synagogue to church. The phenomenon that Goldman identifies is widespread throughout the United States but has not received sufficient attention from either urban historians or scholars of religion. Goldman's analysis reveals another dimension of the complexity of race and religion in contemporary America and sheds new light on one of the most important chapters in the history of black–Jewish relations: the transformation of urban Jewish neighborhoods into African American ones.

Whereas the relationship of African American and Jewish congregations is the subject of Goldman's piece, Susannah Heschel examines the friendship and theological affinities of two individuals: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Although Heschel and King came from dramatically different cultural backgrounds, they shared a number of profound bonds. Susannah Heschel argues that "[w]hat linked Heschel and King theologically was their reading of the Bible, particularly of the prophets, and the understanding of God they drew from their biblical readings." Writings and speeches reveal that Heschel and King were spiritually enriched by their friendship and their work in the civil rights movement. After the men marched arm in arm in Selma, Alabama, Heschel wrote in his diary that King had described the march as "the greatest day in his life," while Heschel "thought of having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing."

The structure of *Black Zion* mirrors the mosaic of African American religions, both contemporary and past. Many black groups and individuals that identify on some level with Judaism also consider themselves to be Christians, Muslims, or—as the example of the Vodouisants illustrates—members of African-based religions. The

book is divided into three sections, each exploring a different cluster of groups and traditions. The first section examines those African Americans who identify themselves as the physical descendants of ancient Israel or as members of the contemporary Jewish community. These include black converts to Judaism, children of Jewish and African American parents, early figures such as Prophet Cherry in Philadelphia and Arnold Josiah Ford of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), as well as currently active groups such as the Hebrew Israelites (also known as the Black Hebrew Israelites). The second section explores the relationship between African American Muslims and Judaism. Two groups are examined—the Nation of Islam and the Nubian Islaamic Hebrews, also called the Ansaaru Allah Community, and more recently, the Holy Tabernacle Ministries. The third section, on African American Christianity and Judaism, reveals how blacks have interacted with Jewish traditions, spaces, and religious leaders through the medium of Christianity and Christian-based traditions. The essays in this section examine the use of the biblical book of Nehemiah by black evangelicals; the relationship of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Joshua Heschel; how African American congregations have transformed synagogue spaces into churches; and the symbolic role of Jews in the Haitian religious imagination.⁷

Even as the theoretical scope of *Black Zion* is expansive, it was not possible to include all areas of the African Diaspora, such as the Rastafarian movement in Jamaica, which has many deep connections to Judaism, or the influences of Sephardic Jewish communities on African slaves in the Caribbean and coastal regions of Central America. Furthermore, we have not included some of the more interesting recent developments in the United States, such as the rise of the Nation of Yahweh, a messianic movement based in Miami, or the establishment of Hatzaad Harishon, an organization concerned with black and Jewish relations in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the number of topics to which we could devote attention would fill an additional volume. We hope, however, that the essays we have included here will stimulate future considerations of the vital significance of racial and ethnic identities in American religion. The unique products of the encounter between African American religions and Judaism provide ample evidence of the creative spiritual capacities of the African American people and the enormous diversity that is embodied in black religious life.

NOTES

1. On black–Jewish relations, see Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis in Liberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black–Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Michael Lerner and Cornel West, *Jews and Blacks: A Dialogue on Race, Religion and Culture in America* (New York: Penguin, 1996); Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins,

1995); and Paul Berman, ed., *Blacks and Jews: Alliances and Arguments* (New York: Delacorte, 1994).

2. See, for example, Howard Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (New York: Schocken, 1964); Israel Gerber, *The Heritage Seekers: American Blacks in Search of Jewish Identity* (Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David, 1977); Yosef A. A. ben-Jochannan, *We the Black Jews* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1993); Graenum Berger, *Black Jews in America: A Documentary with Commentary* (New York: Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1978); Elly M. Wynia, *The Church of God and the Saints of Christ: The Rise of Black Jews* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); and Sydney Freedberg, *Brother Love: Murder, Money and A Messiah* (New York: Pantheon, 1994).

3. For two important statements, see Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law Trivializes Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), and Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

4. See Salo W. Baron, "Ghetto and Emancipation," *Menorah Journal* 14 (June 1928), pp. 515–26.

5. Malcolm X, with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), p. 372.

6. Several contemporary African American Hebrew congregations are featured in a photographic essay by Chester Higgins, Jr., "In the Spirit of Abraham," *CommonQuest* 3.1 (Winter 1998), pp. 20–31. On the current adoption of Jewish traditions by a Guyanese Christian church in New York, see Nadine Brozan, "Finding Room for More Than One Faith at Passover Table," *New York Times*, April 2, 1999, p. 6.

7. The objection may be raised that some subjects do not belong in the same section; after all, how much does a black convert to Orthodox Judaism share with a Hebrew Israelite, and what connection does Martin Luther King, Jr., have with either a Voudouisant or a Catholic in Haiti? Yet we have chosen to combine these disparate subjects precisely in order to show the complexity and fluidity of religious categories that may appear to be fixed. We hope that after one reads the essays in this volume it will be more difficult to define simply and narrowly what it means to be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim.