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Black Culture and Black Zion

African American Religious Encounters with Judaism, 1790–1930, an Overview

Yvonne Chireau

The time has come, it seems to me . . . for an earnest propaganda of Judaism: and I would earnestly plead for Africa . . . and entreat Israel to remember that land of their sojourn and early training, to assist Ethiopia to stretch forth her hands unto God.

The Jewish Question (1898)

THESE WORDS, written by the illustrious pan-African intellectual Edward Wilmot Blyden, echo one of the most prominent themes in black religious thought from the nineteenth century onward: Ethiopianism, the prophesied redemption of Africa, a mission that was to be accomplished through the efforts of black Americans. Blyden, who in his later years became a passionate defender of Islam, initially found in the Jewish doctrine of Zionism an implicit affirmation of his belief in the spiritual destiny of African Americans. To Blyden, the sons and daughters of Africa everywhere in the diaspora—like the Jews—possessed a special charge as religious exemplars for the rest of humanity. Believing that Jewish aspirations for nationhood were comparable to those of blacks, Blyden hoped that some day African Americans would return to their motherland in order to aid, uplift, and restore her to her former glory. As for Zionism, Blyden argued that the significance of that movement extended far beyond the worldly promise of Jewish statehood. The Jews were “qualified by the unspeakable suffering of ages to be the leaders,” he wrote, “not in politics but in religion,” and best suited at “propagating the international religion” by which persons of “all races, climes, and countries [could] call upon the one Lord.” Advocating a kinship between blacks and Jews, Blyden went so far as to suggest that Africa might be a productive site for both to begin the “higher and nobler work” of the uplift of humankind to which both peoples had been called.¹

Edward Wilmot Blyden envisioned a corresponding role for blacks and Jews in the fulfillment of an unfolding, divine plan. But even he did not foresee the innova-

tive relationships that would be forged as African Americans appropriated ideas and resources from Judaism for the construction of their own religious identities. This essay considers black–Jewish encounters in the United States from 1790 to 1930, a significant period in the formation of new religious traditions and institutions in Afro-America. The products of these black–Jewish encounters were quite varied, ranging from black Christians’ identification with the enslaved “Hebrew Children” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the typological association of African American Jews as the descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel in the twentieth. In these and other aspects of black belief and practice, Judaism contributed significantly to the character of African American religious life.

With regard to the variety of religious encounters between African Americans and Judaism, one must consider two recurring themes. The first is analogies in the experiences of blacks and of the Jewish people, including their common histories of dispersion, bondage, persecution, and emancipation. These analogies facilitated the various adaptations of Judaism within black religion, including the adoption of the language and symbols of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the unique formulations of ritual within Afro-Jewish practices. The second theme concerns the self-delineation of black people as Jews, either by an inherited bicultural heritage or by the appropriation of Jewish accoutrements, underscoring the significance of Judaism as a viable source of black American identity. Although these themes may not represent all manifestations of the historical relationship between black religion and Judaism, they do acknowledge the convergence of these traditions, often occurring in experiences that are more complex and multifaceted than is suggested by the designation “black Jews.”²

ALLEGORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Analogies in the experiences of blacks and Jews have produced important models for the study of African American religion. Parallels can be seen in the language describing the two groups’ respective histories. The concept of diaspora, for example, which has traditionally referred to the global dispersion of the Jews among the gentile nations, also describes the voluntary and involuntary migrations of blacks from Africa to Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas for over four centuries in the modern era. Whereas interpretations of the black diaspora as analogous to that of the Jews can be seen in American writing as early as the nineteenth century, conventional uses of the term coincide with the establishment of African and African American history as fields of academic study in the 1970s. Yet during this time few texts utilized what could be considered a diasporic approach to black American religion.³

Although both Africans and Jews would face dispersion, exile, and persecution in the modern period, earlier episodes in the Jewish past assumed particular significance for the descendants of African peoples in the United States. Unlike Jewish immigrants, the Africans who were brought to North America did not possess a unified

spiritual heritage or a single sacred myth of their origins. It was in part the influence of Christianity that brought African bondspersons, who represented diverse ethnic backgrounds, into a recognition of what they perceived to be a shared, communal history. Christianity provided what E. Franklin Frazier, in *The Negro Church in America* (1964), termed a new “basis of social cohesion” for enslaved Africans, who had been torn from their lands of origin, their kin, and their indigenous religious institutions. The conversion of numbers of slaves during the Protestant revivals in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America facilitated the formation of cultural frameworks by which black people began to construct a collective identity. As they made Christianity their own, African Americans gave meaning to the ordeal of slavery by highlighting the correspondences between their own experiences and those of the biblical Jews. These analogies would have very real implications for the development of black religion in the United States.

African American religion in this early stage was informed by ideas, images, and characters appropriated from the Hebrew Bible. Interpretations of the Hebrew Bible provided the substance for many of the innovations that distinguished Afro-Christianity from its white counterparts. While all Protestants adhered to a faith tradition that was nurtured by an understanding of the Old and the New Testaments as holy Scripture, African American Christians possessed a special affinity for the canon of Hebrew texts, including the Psalms and Proverbs, the apocalyptic books of the prophets, and the narrative accounts of Israel’s formative history. Enslaved and free black converts to Christianity in the antebellum period engaged these biblical sources through practices such as prayer, preaching, and devotional song.

Studies from a variety of academic disciplines—from theology and history to ethnomusicology and religious studies—have given attention to the profound influence of the Old Testament in the lives of black Americans.⁴ Lawrence Levine, in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (1978), argues that the Bible was central to the creation of African Americans’ sacred world. In a discussion of the spirituals, Levine writes that “the essence of slave religion cannot be fully grasped without understanding [the] Old Testament bias”:

Daniel and David and Joshua and Moses and Noah, all of whom fill the lines of the spirituals, were delivered in this world and delivered in ways which struck the imagination of the slaves. Over and over their songs dwelt upon the spectacle of the Red Sea opening to allow the Hebrew slaves past before inundating the mighty armies of the Pharaoh. They lingered delightedly upon the image of little David humbling the great Goliath with a stone. . . . They retold in endless variation the stories of the blind and humbled Samson bringing down the mansions of his conquerors; of the ridiculed Noah patiently building the ark which would deliver him from the doom of a mocking world; of the timid Jonah attaining freedom from his confinement

through faith. The similarity of these tales to the situation of the slaves was too clear for them not to see it. . . . “O my Lord delivered Daniel,” the slaves observed, “O why not deliver me, too?”⁵

Religiously inventive, enslaved black Christians selected those parts of the Hebrew Bible that affirmed their experiences both as persons of faith and as an oppressed race. The slaves believed themselves to be another Israel, a people who toiled in the “Egypt” of North America but who were providentially guided by the same God who had led the Jews into the Promised Land. Projecting their own lives into Old Testament accounts, African Americans recast their destiny in terms of the consummation of a divine drama, the event of the Exodus. For African Americans, notes historian of religions Charles Long in *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (1986), the Exodus was powerfully invested with religious meaning. “The deliverance of the Children of Israel from the Egyptians,” Long observes, “became an archetype which enabled the slave to live with promise.” Looking ahead to their ultimate day of deliverance, African Americans participated in a reenactment of the Jewish past, claiming Jewish history as *their* sacred history, a history in which the biblical world was inextricably bound with the present, in which the future carried the promise of freedom.⁶

Enslaved black Christians also fashioned vernacular practices out of Old Testament sources, expressing their most ardent beliefs and ultimate concerns in oral traditions. The spirituals, for example, forged in the oral cultural milieu, made consistent use of biblical imagery. In song, bondspersons declared the dual hardships of enslavement and the burdens of the believer’s walk. The spiritual “Wrestling Jacob” testified of endurance and struggle as the keys to righteousness; “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” recognized human suffering and God’s presence therein; “Blow Your Trumpet, Gabriel” celebrated the promise of future rewards, and “Steal Away” and “I Am Going to Canaan Land” imparted conspiratorial allusions to freedom to otherworldly lyrics. Finally, the classic spiritual “Go Down, Moses” provided the quintessential explication of the slaves’ identification with Israel, alluding to the history that both shared, as retold in the Exodus narrative:

Go down Moses
Way down in Egyptland
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.⁷

Old Testament imagery also infused African American ritual experiences. Black Christians brought the Hebrew Bible to life in African-based practices that had been preserved for generations within the slave community. In liturgical traditions such as the Ring Shout—the circular, ecstatic performance that often accompanied slave prayer and worship meetings—bondspersons revisited African practices of spirit possession and ceremonial dance. In the Ring Shout, Levine has argued, time was

ritually abolished and recreated, and the present was extended back to the past and into the mythic realm of the Old Testament. “[t]he slaves created a new world,” he notes, “by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live.” In these moments of transcendence, the boundaries between sacred and profane were effaced, as black worshippers dramatized pivotal events in early Jewish history, such as the Israelites’ liberation and triumphant departure out of Egypt, their momentous crossing over the River Jordan, and their victorious, martial procession around the walls of Jericho. Long after slavery had ended, African Americans continued to enshrine events and persons from the Bible in their vernacular traditions. The Hebrew leader Moses has been perhaps the most frequently appropriated Old Testament personality in black folk thought. Moses was valorized in the life of Harriet Tubman, the “Moses of her people”; he was immortalized in the legacy of Marcus Garvey, the “Black Moses” who was to lead and uplift the entire African race; and he was mythologized in African American folklore as a powerful conjurer of the supernatural arts. Moses’ prominence derived from the correspondence of his biblical role as a liberator with that of numerous hero figures in black culture.⁸

The Old Testament also provided important referents for the creation of written verse, as seen in the voluminous antislavery writings of African American clergy and laypersons prior to the antebellum era. By the late 1700s black Americans were engaged in a tradition of producing letters known as *black jeremiads*, a form of protest literature that challenged racial injustice with predictions of divine judgment, impending disaster, and strident calls for repentance. Wilson Moses, in *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (1983), argues that the African American jeremiadic tradition, which was named for the sixth-century Hebrew prophet, manifested elements of an insurgent nationalist ideology. African Americans who adopted the rhetorical formulary of the black jeremiad included Prince Hall, the eighteenth-century founder of the black Freemasons; the Afro-feminist lecturer Maria Stewart; and clergy such as Absalom Jones and Richard Allen of the African Methodist Church, the first independent black denomination in the United States. Frequently utilized by African American orators, the jeremiad was a vehicle of protest in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, rivaled only by later appropriations of the prophet Isaiah, whose messianic proclamations were linked to redemptive suffering in twentieth-century black Christian theology.⁹

Although the Exodus account provided an enduring model for black Americans, there were other analogies with Jewish experience that were given prominent expression in African American religious thought. In particular, the concept of “chosenness” captured the spiritual imagination of blacks. Enslaved African American Christians in the antebellum era had conceived of themselves as a chosen people through their identification with the biblical Jews. The idea of chosenness was further reinforced in the decades following Emancipation, when it appeared that the Promised Land would remain perpetually out of reach. By the end of the nineteenth century, black chosenness would be conflated with African American understand-

ings of historical destiny, as articulated in the text of Psalm 68:31, “Princes shall come out of Egypt and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.” This ancient biblical prophecy became the paradigm by which an entire generation of clergy and theologians fathomed God’s providential design in allowing the oppression of the black race, and it became, according to Albert Raboteau, “the most quoted verse in African American religious history.”¹⁰

The notion of chosenness, or divine favor of a particular people, would be articulated in a variety of ways by African Americans in the United States and abroad during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Ethiopianism—the name that was given to this racialist discourse—gave a powerful philosophical impetus to movements as diverse as Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Nation of Islam, and the Ras Tafari Brethren in Jamaica. At the heart of Ethiopianism was the belief that the descendants of the inhabitants of Africa (Ethiopia) were specially selected to effect God’s great plan of redemption. This variation on the Jewish idea of the chosen people allowed for a unique understanding of history and the agonizing injustices that African Americans had endured. Yet in a departure from the Jewish conception of chosenness, the Ethiopian doctrine did not posit that the sufferings of African Americans had been brought upon them as a consequence of their unfaithfulness, or by their breach of the divine covenant. The meaning of Psalm 68:31 was interpreted according to the exceptional mandate that it gave African Americans, for out of their afflictions would come greatness, the restoration of Africa to its former glory among nations, and the spiritual and social uplift of the entire black race. The unification and redemption of African people was to be accomplished through the sustained labors of New World blacks, who would return to the motherland as preachers and teachers, carrying with them the elevating power of Christianity. Ethiopianism thereby provided the theological rationale for the endeavors of numerous African American churches and missionary associations in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it undergirded the ideology of secular black nationalism in the century to come.¹¹

Interpretations of the Ethiopian prophecy vacillated between particularistic ideas of black people as the chosen elect, to universalistic perspectives that suggested that all of humankind would be saved during the advent of a new millennial phase of history in which blacks would play a vital role. The theme of chosenness was given a distinctive slant within African American formulations of Judaism. In the traditions of black Jewry that would emerge in the early twentieth century, the emphasis upon chosenness fostered a definition of race which allowed blacks to counter the assaults of Anglo-American supremacy and the stigma of African American inferiority. Ultimately, the Old Testament, which had been the principal resource for African American appropriations of Judaism, came to be understood by many blacks as a literal presentation of the history of the African people—as the true Jews.

BLACKS AS JEWS

Directly before the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans' identification with Judaism acquired additional elements. In black American religious discourse, the rhetoric of chosenness that had pervaded biblical Ethiopianism was supplemented with several important features. After 1900 a plethora of groups who characterized themselves as black Jews, black Hebrews, and black Israelites expanded the metaphorical kinship between black religion and Judaism so as to encompass racial dimensions. In many of these new black–Jewish religious groups, not only were the symbols and images of Judaism employed allegorically, but Jewish practices led to the construction of new identities by which blacks literally *became* Jews.

One of the first communities to which the designation “black Jews” was applied was the Church of God and the Saints of Christ (also known as the Temple Beth-el congregations), established in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1896 by William Saunders Crowdy. Crowdy, a former Baptist preacher, called his congregations “tabernacles” and embedded select Jewish beliefs and practices within a format that was similar to that of a Christian church. This group's appropriation of Judaism constituted what some writers have characterized a Hebraic-Christian or Judeo-Christian formation, in which aspects of Old Testament tradition were integrated with Christian elements. Like several other African American groups that were organized shortly after the turn of the twentieth century, such as Prophet Frank S. Cherry's Church of the Living God—Pillar and Ground of Truth for All Nations in Philadelphia, and Elder Warren Robinson's Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom, Ever Live and Never Die Church in New York City,¹² the Church of God adopted Jewish customs that may have been based upon a literal interpretation of Old Testament rites. Members of the Church of God, for instance, maintained the office of the rabbinate, celebrated Passover, and observed a Saturday sabbath while incorporating New Testament principles, emphasizing the works of Jesus Christ and his teachings, and practicing rituals such as baptism. This pattern of selecting components of Judaism and preserving theological and doctrinal perspectives from Christianity was typical of a number of groups in the the early establishment of black Jewish communities in the United States.¹³

Many of the early black Jewish groups encouraged their followers to make a conscious break with certain aspects of their heritage while retaining others. Name transformation, or the rejection of the terms “Negro” and “black” in favor of “Hebrew,” was one strategy by which some blacks signified Judaism as a racial classification. African Americans who identified as Jews defined themselves not only in opposition to whites, but against other blacks, and especially black Christians. Prophet Cherry, for example, leader of the Church of the Living God in Philadelphia, frequently castigated black clergy, calling them “damn fools” and “vultures,” while Rabbi Wentworth Matthew of the Commandment Keepers Congregation in Harlem ridiculed what he called “niggerititions,” religious activities such as shouting and speaking in

tongues, which were seen as the stereotypical mannerisms of Afro-Christian revivalists. While such practices were repudiated as incompatible with African American Jewish identity, other unique elements appearing in black Jewish worship, such as oral preaching and instrumental rhythm (with Cherry), or Conjure healing practices (Matthew), revealed a creative synthesis of Jewish styles with compatible religious cultural traditions that were readily familiar to many black Americans.¹⁴

A number of African American Jewish congregations were established between 1908 and 1925, a period coinciding with the Great Migration, when vast numbers of black southerners relocated to northern urban centers in the United States. Prior to this period many black Americans had had little or no personal interaction with Jews or Jewish culture. Although there is evidence that relationships between African Americans and Jews during the slavery period resulted in a few conversions by blacks—such as “Old Uncle Billy,” a bondsman in antebellum Charleston, South Carolina, whose experiences were widely documented—most African American encounters with the Jewish religion during the nineteenth century, as we have seen, consisted of figurative interpretations of biblical sources. By the second decade of the twentieth century, however, black appropriations of Judaism showed evidence of contact with members of a larger, international Jewish community that included Sephardic, Ashkenazic, and Ethiopian Jews. These contacts played an important role in revitalizing African American Jewish traditions and helping to create the new religious identities that further distinguished black Jews from their white counterparts.¹⁵

In the mid-1920s African American Jewish congregations were formed in the cities of Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, and in New Jersey. Converging patterns of emigration may have contributed to the proliferation of black Jewish groups in the cities. It is possible that black migrants arriving from South America and the West Indies carried Jewish beliefs and practices from countries where Judaism had been established long before European Jews entered the United States in any significant numbers. As early as the seventeenth century, for example, Sephardic Jews from Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands had founded settlements in the northern regions of Latin America, Central America, and the Caribbean. Intermarriage between diasporic Jews, black slaves, and freepersons were not uncommon in these areas; out of these unions emerged some of the first African American converts to Judaism in the Western hemisphere. The influx of West Indian and South American blacks, and later migrations of Jews from Eastern Europe, may have resulted in greater exposure of black Americans to Judaism, especially given the close residential proximity of all of these groups in urban ghettos during the first few decades of the twentieth century.¹⁶

Some black Jews in the new urban communities were consistent in their understanding of Judaism as a religion with a special appeal to African American people. This emphasis may have derived from the strong nationalist orientation of some black Jewish leaders and their constituents. Rabbi Mordecai Herman, a member of



FIGURE 1.1 *Rabbi Arnold J. Ford with members of the UNIA choir and Congregation Beth B'nai Abraham, 1925. Courtesy Corbis/Underwood and Underwood.*

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and organizer of the Moorish Zionist Temple of New York, was one of the first African Americans to endorse the establishment of a shared homeland for black Jews and others in Palestine. Another African American rabbi, Arnold Josiah Ford (fig. 1.1), was particularly active in the Garvey movement at Liberty Hall, the New York headquarters of the UNIA. Both Herman and Ford recruited Garveyites into their respective congregations, which included a sizable contingent of West Indian immigrants. Racial exclusivism, informed by Garvey's brand of black nationalism and the older ideals of Ethiopian destiny, came to be a dominant feature of African American Judaism during this formative period.¹⁷

Some African Americans self-identified as Jews by claiming ties to an exclusive lineage whose roots, many alleged, were in Africa, the spiritual source from which Judaism had emerged. A corollary to these assertions was the claim that Africa was the geographical foundation—the land that had produced the Jewish religion—and that black people had lost knowledge of their ancestral heritage because of the

traumas of slavery and social intermixture. Possessing a hereditary right to Judaism, all blacks were therefore obligated to reclaim their religion and their culture. A variety of embellishments on the theme of African Hebrew origins were advanced within black Jewish traditions. Some leaders conjectured that the African lineage of the Jews could be identified in the “Hebrewisms” in African culture, such as the symbol of the shield of David, found inscribed on West African artifacts, or could be traced to similar linguistic elements or to parallels between indigenous African and Jewish rituals and concepts of law. Others provided biblical explanations for their claims. Prophet Cherry cited his interpretation of disparate verses from the Old Testament that attested to the primacy of blacks in Judaism with a racialized theology, which conceived of both God and Jesus Christ as black. Yet unlike others who came after him, Cherry did not teach of the Jews’ African origins but conjectured, according to one of his followers, that black people “were chased out of Palestine by the Romans into the west coast of Africa” and ultimately were “captured and sold” as slaves to America.¹⁸

It appears that denial of the veracity of “white” Jewish traditions was requisite to the construction of a new, racialized religious identity for many African American Jews. The assertion that Judaism was uniquely suited to black people went hand in hand with the claim by some black Jews that Jews of European ancestry were in fact frauds or “interlopers.” Prophet Cherry, for example, often quoted Revelation 3:9 (“Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie, behold, I will make them come and bow down before your feet and learn that I have loved you”) in support of his belief that white Jews were religious impostors. Rabbi Arnold Ford taught that the “real” Jews were black people, while Jews of European descent were said to be “offshoots” of the original lineage of black Jews or converts who had received the religion secondhand from Africans. Black Jewish dogma, as represented by the statements of these leaders, expounded tenets of spiritual and cultural provenance that foreshadowed the beliefs of later religious movements with racially exclusive, nationalist concerns, such as the Nation of Islam.¹⁹

The idea that black American Jews were descendants of the ancient tribes of Israel was corroborated by an elaborate schema that chronicled the beginnings of humanity, the genealogy of the Hebrew people, and the origins of racial categories. Focusing on etiological elements of biblical texts, some black Jewish interpreters formulated mythologies that explained color difference. While detailing the “anthropology of the Ethiopian Hebrews,” Rabbi Wentworth Matthew once described how according to the Bible, blacks were directly descended from Abraham. “Isaac, son of Abraham, was father of Esau, he explained, “whose skin was hairy, like the white man’s . . . and of Jacob . . . whose skin was smooth, like the black man’s.” Similarly, Prophet Cherry explicated a passage in II Kings 5:27, his interpretation of the story of a leprous curse placed by God upon the first white man, Gehazi, an act that resulted in his pale skin coloring. This interpretation directly countered one of the

most widely held myths in Western Christianity—the so-called Curse of Ham—which told of Noah’s condemnation of his grandson Canaan (Genesis 9 and 10), an account that was seen by many as providing divine sanction for the enslavement of blacks. African American Jews expounded their own myths, which had specific application to the situation of black people in the United States. Their beliefs were informed by internally produced values and the communal recognition of their cultural distinctiveness.²⁰

The premise that the original Israelites were Africans was reflected in early twentieth century scholarly literature. Some of these studies, such as Joseph Williams’s *Hebrewisms of West Africa from the Nile to the Niger with the Jews* (1930) and Allen Godbey’s *The Lost Tribes: A Myth* (1930), established the African roots of Judaism by demonstrating commonalities between the religion of the Israelites and that of indigenous peoples in sub-Saharan African societies.²¹ The veneration of Africa as the source of Judaism was informed not only by the historical significance of Africa in black American thought, but by the discovery of Ethiopian Jews, whose presence had been documented as early as the eighteenth century. For black Jews in the United States, it would appear that the Ethiopians provided the vital link that substantiated many of their claims to racial and religious solidarity with Africa. Both black and white Jews in the United States would seek to establish relations with the Ethiopian *Beta Yisroel*, known also as the Falashas, whose practice of Judaism, it was believed, was so ancient as to have predated the compilation of the Mishnah and the Talmud.²²

To be sure, the self-understanding of one of the largest and best-known black Jewish congregations in New York City, the Commandment Keepers Congregation of Harlem, was inspired by the legacy of Ethiopian Judaism. Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew, founder of the Commandment Keepers and its associated lodge, the Royal Order of Ethiopian Hebrews, viewed the Ethiopians as the progenitors of the black Jews in America. An implicit link between African Americans and the ancient heritage of the Ethiopian Jews provided the basis of Matthew’s identification. Matthew, a West Indian citizen who was himself born in Africa, held that black Jews in America were actual kin to the Jews of Ethiopia, who had descended from the lineage established by King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as related in the biblical account of 1 Kings 10 and II Chronicles 9. Armed with the knowledge of an indigenous, African-based Judaism, Matthew and other black Hebrews in the United States would strive to legitimate their Jewish heritage in response to critics and outsiders who had expressed skepticism and hostility toward them and their claims.

The discovery of the *Beta Yisroel* stimulated hope among some black Jews in the possibility of creating an African American colony in Africa. Although alluding to all of Africa and not just the modern East African state, the idea of “Ethiopia,” as we have seen, had been the locus of black American visions of destiny in the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century Marcus Garvey sharpened the rhetoric of Ethiopianism by producing a broadly appealing vision of “Africa for Africans,” in order to mobilize an international movement. But it was Arnold Ford, the African

American rabbi who was instrumental in the formation of several black Jewish congregations in New York in the 1920s, who would successfully pull together the disparate strands of cultural and religious sentiment into a practical program. Sustained by his dedication to Judaism as well as his political commitment to Garveyism, Ford would be the first black American to emigrate in order to found a homeland, a black Jewish Zion, in Ethiopia.²³

Arnold Josiah Ford was one of black Judaism's most influential leaders. Born and raised in Barbados, he migrated to the United States at the end of the First World War, as did many other Afro-Caribbeans during the heyday of the Garvey movement. He immersed himself in the cultural milieu of postwar black New York, performing as a jazz artist, serving as choirmaster for the UNIA, and authoring the Universal Ethiopian Hymnal for the Garvey movement (fig. 1.2). Ford's compositions displayed his diverse linguistic skills, showing influences from Jewish, Christian, Islamic, and African sources. Many of his hymns also evoked the biblical analogies between black Americans and the Jews and promoted the doctrine of Ethiopianism, as was evident in several lyrics in which the redemption of Africa was a prominent theme. But Ford's interests extended far beyond his artistic talents. In 1923 he accepted the rabbinate of Beth B'nai Abraham (House of the Sons of Abraham), a black Hebrew congregation in Harlem. Fluent in Hebrew and Yiddish, Ford studied the Torah and the Talmud under the tutelage of some white Jews who were liberal patrons of the modest network of integrated synagogues and Hebrew schools in New York City. Ford would eventually devote his full energy to his emigration plan, which had developed partly as a natural extension of his pan-African sensibilities and partly out of his ardent desire to establish a black Jewish homeland. He organized two associations to help further this goal: the Progressive Corporation, a business enterprise aimed at supporting African American industry and technical development in Africa, and the Aurieth Club, which was comprised of black professionals who supported African emigration.²⁴

In November 1930, with the financial backing of Beth B'nai Abraham, the Aurieth Club, and members of the Commandment Keepers congregation, Ford set out as an official delegate to the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. Reestablishing himself in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, over the next three years Ford persisted in his efforts to secure territory for the black Jewish community. Between 1931 and 1932 some 60 members of Beth B'nai Abraham would follow him to Africa, many hoping to settle an 800 acre area north of Lake Tana, in the province inhabited by the *Beta Yisrael*, which had been set aside by the Ethiopian government. However, even as his status as unofficial leader of the emerging community of African Americans in Ethiopia was confirmed, Ford was not able to realize his dream of creating a black Jewish colony. In 1934, after a brief illness, he died, on the eve of the outbreak of the Italo-Ethiopian War. In New York Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew would take up the mantle of leadership among the black Jews, and for nearly four decades he continued to teach his community of their

The Universal Ethiopian Hymnal



Compiled by

ARNOLD J. FORD, Musical Director at Liberty Hall
New York, 1920, 1921, 1922

Rabbi of the Congregation Beth B'nai Abraham, N. Y.

FIGURE 1.2 Arnold Ford. From the frontispiece from the *Universal Ethiopian Hymnal*, 1922. Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Ethiopian heritage, promoting the vision of Judaism that he and Ford had shared among white and black American rabbis, their congregations, and other religious organizations.²⁵

Black and Jewish religious interactions provide evidence of the eclectic strategies utilized by African Americans in the creation of new traditions. African American understandings of Judaism were informed by the social and political orientations of black people in the United States and were often embedded in African Americans' responses to the discrimination, violence, and exploitation that they had suffered in American society. Blacks understood and experienced the Jewish faith, as they did other religions, on their own terms. They made use of Jewish traditions, drawing upon their collective historical experiences as well as their own cultural resources. Whether African American identifications with Judaism were allegorical, as with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black Christians who assimilated the Hebrew Scriptures into their own sacred world, or were exegetical, as with the pervasive myth of Ethiopianism, they demonstrated selective, self-conscious, and creative appropriations of Jewish sources. Ultimately these appropriations facilitated the construction of alternative religious and racial identities.

As for Arnold Ford, as the first person to synthesize the themes that had historically characterized black and Jewish religious interactions, he had proven himself a pioneer. The issues of biblical interpretation, cultural identity, racial politics, black nationhood, and spiritual destiny that he engaged during his life would be continually revisited by African American Jews into the late twentieth century. As one historian has observed, "Ford's teachings were not only an interesting amplification of preceding traditions, but [they] were to mark the conceptual world of following generations." Arnold Ford and his party of black Hebrews returned to Africa, the promised land and the putative source of Judaism, in order to help Ethiopia "stretch forth her hands unto God." With their departure, black American encounters with Judaism had come full circle.²⁶

NOTES

1. Edward Wilmot Blyden, *The Jewish Question* (Liverpool, England: Lionel Hart, 1898), pp. 8, 21. On Blyden's understanding of "international religion," see Hollis Lynch, *Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pan-Negro Patriot, 1832–1912*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); on Blyden and Judaism, see Lynch, "A Black Nineteenth-Century Response to Jews and Zionism: The Case of Edward Wilmot Blyden," in Joseph Washington, ed., *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue* (Boston: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 42–54. Blyden's recommendation of Africa as a potential location for Jewish settlement was revisited in a different context in 1903, when the British government offered 6,000 square miles of land in western Uganda to the Zionist movement. See Robert Weisbord, *African Zion: The Attempt to Establish a Jewish Colony in the East African Protectorate* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968).

2. The historian James Tinney maintains that a distinction should be drawn between “Black Jews,” “Black Hebrews,” and “Black Israelites” as three representative forms of African American Judaism in the United States. He argues that “Black Jews” refers to those groups who adopt Jewish practices and traditions while maintaining a Christological perspective; “Black Hebrews” are more orthodox in their orientation to Judaism; and “Black Israelites,” the most nationalist in their ideology, are, according to Tinney, “the farthest from traditional Judaism in beliefs and practices.” See James Tinney, “Black Jews: A House Divided,” *Christianity Today*, December 7, 1973, pp. 52–54.

3. An exception would be the work of the anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who adopted a diasporic or hemispheric perspective in his treatment of black religion in the United States. Herskovits considered continuities of African culture in the African American experience by formulating a “baseline” of African cultural retentions. See Melville Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1945), and *The New World Negro* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966). For a current consideration of black and Jewish “diasporas” see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 205–12. Other than “diaspora,” a term that has been adopted from the Jewish experience and applied to black America is “holocaust,” used recently in reference to the destruction of African cultures in the New World slave environment. See, for example, Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 154. On the diaspora model in historical research, see especially George Shepperson, “The African diaspora—or the African Abroad,” *African Forum: A Quarterly Journal of Contemporary Affairs* 2 (1966), 76–93; and St. Clair Drake, “The Black Diaspora in Pan-African Perspective,” *Black Scholar* 7 (September 1975), 2–14. For an essay that considers models of diaspora studies in religion, see Albert Raboteau, “African Religions in America: Theoretical Perspectives,” in Joseph Harris, ed., *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1993), pp. 65–79.

4. See Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Cain Felder, *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers 1990); and Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press 1994) for approaches to Old Testament traditions as they have appeared in black Christian belief and practice.

5. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 50. On the spirituals as the “oral bible” of the slaves, see Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 36–43.

6. Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), p. 179. The Hebrew Bible was also a source of inspiration for black resistance, as seen in the conspiracies of Gabriel Prosser, Nat Turner, and Denmark Vesey, in which Old Testament verses were read and interpreted by African Americans for their subversive antislavery meanings. See Timothy L. Smith, “Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Church History*, 41, no. 4, 1972; Vincent Harding, “Religion and Resistance Among Antebellum Negroes, 1800–1860,” in *The Making of Black America*, vol. 1, ed. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick (New York: Atheneum Press, 1969), pp. 179–97.

7. Early scholarly works that examined the black sacred musical tradition of the spirituals include W. E. B. DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Saint Martins Press, 1997), and James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson's *Books of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1925–1926); and R. Nathaniel Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute* (Hampton, Va.: Hampton Institute Press, 1927). More recently, see Miles Mark Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs of the United States* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953); Harold Courlander, *Negro Folk Music, U.S.A.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963); John Lovell, *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Macmillan, 1972); Dena Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1977) and James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991). As folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and historians have shown, African American spirituals are an unparalleled source for comprehending the interior modes and meanings of black religion.

8. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p. 32. On time transposition in the black slave visionary experience, see Mechal Sobel, *Trabelin On: The Slave Journey to an Afro-Baptist Faith* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 125–26. On the figure of Moses in black culture, see John Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989).

9. On the black jeremiad, see Wilson J. Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), pp. 30–48.

10. Albert J. Raboteau, "Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands: Black Destiny in Nineteenth Century America," in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 42.

11. On the confluence of Christianity, black nationalism, and the chosenness doctrine in biblical Ethiopianism, see St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1970); Wilson Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Albert Raboteau, "Exodus, Ethiopia, and Racial Messianism: Texts and Contexts of African American Chosenness," in William Hutchinson and Hartmut Lehmann, *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). For an essay that considers the overlap of black and Jewish historical experiences and their similar conceptions of providential destiny, see also St. Clair Drake, "African Diaspora and Jewish Diaspora: Convergence and Divergence," in Joseph Washington, ed., *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue* (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1989).

12. Cherry's church was established in 1912, and the Temple of the Gospel of the Kingdom, Ever Live and Never Die was founded in 1917. Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944), pp. 31–40. On Elder Roberson, see Ruth Landes, "The Negro Jews of Harlem," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 2, (December 1967), 178–80. For a recent compilation of bibliographic sources on black Jewish sectarianism, see Sherry Sherrod DuPree, *African American Holiness Pentecostal Movement: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), pp. 354–65.

13. The founding dates of the earliest black-Jewish congregations are in dispute. Shapiro notes that F. S. Cherry's Church of God was organized in Tennessee in 1886, but other sources do not confirm this date. Another group, the Moorish Zion Temple, founded in 1899 by a Rabbi Richlieu of Brooklyn, New York, was one of the earliest black Jewish congregations that did not combine Jewish and Christian beliefs, as did the Church of God and the Saints of

Christ. For a discussion of the origins of black Judaism in America, see Deanne Shapiro, "Factors in the Development of Black Judaism," in C. Eric Lincoln, ed., *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Doubleday, 1974); see also Howard Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem: Negro Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Negro Leadership* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), p. 51. On Crowdy and the Church of God and the Saints of Christ, see Elly M. Wynia, *The Church of God and the Saints of Christ: The Rise of Black Jews* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994); and Raymond Julius Jones, "A Comparative Study of Religious Cult Behavior Among Negroes with Special Reference to Emotional Group Conditioning Factors" (Washington, D.C.: Graduate School for the Division of the Social Sciences, Howard University, 1939).

14. Howard Waitzkin, "Black Judaism in New York," *Harvard Journal of Negro Affairs* 1, no. 3 (1967), 12–44; Brotz, *Black Jews of Harlem*, pp. 34–35; Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, pp. 31–38.

15. On "Old Uncle Billy," see Ralph Melnick, "Billy Simons: The Black Jew of Charleston," *American Jewish Archives* 32 (1980), 3–8; Julius Eckman, "Old Billy: A Jewish Rechabite," *American Jewish Archives* 15 (April 1963), 3–5; Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Engleman, *The Jews of Charleston* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950), p. 78, cited in Bertram Wallace Korn, "Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 1789–1865," in Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson, eds., *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), p. 115. On other cases of black converts to Judaism in the nineteenth century, see Graenum Berger, *Black Jews in America: A Documentary with Commentary* (New York: Commission on Synagogue Relations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York, 1978), pp. 11, 29–37.

16. Jacob Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970). On African American and Jewish social proximity, see Hasia Diner, *In the Almost Promised Land: American Jews and Blacks, 1915–1935*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

17. Theodore Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (Berkeley, Cal.: Ramparts Press, 1971), pp. 134–35; Brotz, *Black Jews of Harlem*, p. 11. Randall Burkett notes that Prophet Cherry of the Church of the Living God in Philadelphia was also "directly linked" to the UNIA. See Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 182. The UNIA would be a consistent ideological influence upon the black Jews. However, a possible genealogical connection to African American Islam can also be seen, especially in the advent of the black Jewish congregations that were called "Moorish," similar to the immediate forerunner of the Nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, a black Islamic sect founded in Newark, New Jersey, in 1913. In 1899 Rabbi Leon Richlieu established the Moorish Zion Temple in Brooklyn, and in 1921 Mordecai Herman or Mordecai Joseph reformed the Moorish Zionist Temple in Harlem, with affiliate branches in Newark and Philadelphia. See Shapiro, "Factors in the Development of Black Judaism," p. 266, and Landes, "The Negro Jews of Harlem," p. 181.

18. Kenneth King, "Some Notes on Arnold J. Ford and New World Black Attitudes to Ethiopia," in Randall K. Burkett and Richard Newman, eds., *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1978), pp. 49–55; Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, p. 115.

19. Elias Farajaje-Jones, *In Search of Zion: The Spiritual Significance of Africa in Black Religious Movements* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 167; Deanne Shapiro, "Factors in the Development of Black Judaism," p. 268; Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem*, p. 56.

20. Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem*, p. 20; Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming* (New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969), p. 144; Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, p. 34; Farajaje-Jones, *In Search of Zion*, p. 168. On the Curse of Ham, see Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), pp. 17–20.

21. More recent works that argue for widespread Judaic and Israelite influences in African religion include Yoseph A. A. ben-Jochannan, *We the Black Jews*, vols. 1 and 2, (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1993); Jose V. Malcion, *How the Hebrews Became Jews* (New York: UB Productions, 1978); Rudolph Windsor, *From Babylon to Timbuktu* (New York: Exposition Press, 1969); Rudolph Windsor and Steven Jacobs, *The Hebrew Heritage of Our West African Ancestors* (Wilmington, Del.: Rose-Lee, Inc., 1971); and Steven Jacobs, *The Hebrew Heritage of Black Africa* (Philadelphia: Boldlee Publishing, 1976).

22. Wolf Leslau, *Falasha Anthology: The Black Jews of Ethiopia* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), p. x. In 1949 Leslau first published his research on Ethiopian Judaism, called “The Black Jews of Ethiopia,” in *Commentary* 7 (1949), 216–24, and later, *Falasha Anthology*, which made available to an English-speaking readership the writings of the Ethiopian Jewish community, including the Torah and other apocryphal literature written in Ge’ez, the ancient language of Ethiopia.

23. The desire to reclaim Africa had been present in the UNIA from its inception, and as early as 1919 the organization had begun to investigate the prospects of purchasing land for the colonization of Liberia. See John Henrik Clarke, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). On Garvey and Ethiopianism, see Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement*.

24. William Scott, “Rabbi Arnold Ford’s Back-to-Ethiopia Movement: A Study of Black Emigration, 1930–1935,” *Pan African Journal* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1975), 191–202; Kenneth King, “Some Notes on Arnold J. Ford,” pp. 50–53. The intersecting social and cultural worlds of black and white Jews within interracial synagogues, such as the Moorish Palestinian Talmud Torah Congregation in East New York or Rabbi Richlieu’s Moorish Zionist Temple Society, is given brief attention in Arthur Dobrin, “A History of the Negro Jews in America” (unpublished paper, City College of the City University of New York, 1965; Schomburg Collection, New York Public Library), and in Landes, “Negro Jews in Harlem,” pp. 184–187. More recently, black Jewish congregations that are recognized by the larger Jewish community include Adat Bayt Moshesh in New Jersey and Mount Horeb Congregation in New York City.

25. Scott, “Rabbi Arnold Ford’s Back-to-Ethiopia Movement,” pp. 194–200, and Scott, *Sons of Sheba’s Race: African-Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935–1941* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 183; Joseph E. Harris, *African American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936–1941* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 11–14; Landes, “Negro Jews in Harlem,” pp. 184–85.

26. Farajaje-Jones, *In Search of Zion*, p. 171.