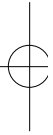

Black Judaism





Black Judaism

Story of an American Movement

James E. Landing

University of Illinois at Chicago

Carolina Academic Press
Durham, North Carolina

Copyright © 2002
James E. Landing
All Rights Reserved

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Landing, James E.

Black Judaism: story of an American movement / James E. Landing.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-89089-820-0

1. Black Hebrews--United States--History. 2. United States--Religion--20th century. 1. Title.

BP605.B64L36 2001

299'.93--dc21

97-013610

Carolina Academic Press
700 Kent Street
Durham, North Carolina 27701
Telephone (919) 489-7486
Fax (919) 493-5668
E-mail: cap@cap-press.com
www.cap-press.com

Printed in the United States of America.

Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii

Part I Origins of Black Judaism

Chapter 1	Varieties of Black Judaism	5
Chapter 2	The Background of Black Judaism in American Protestantism	17
Chapter 3	Origins of Black Judaism in the American South	37

Part II Congregational Foundations of Black Judaism

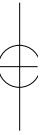
Chapter 4	Black Judaism in Chicago, 1895–1930	91
Chapter 5	Black Judaism in Harlem, New York City, 1896–1930	119
Chapter 6	Black Judaism in Africa	159
Chapter 7	Black Judaism in Latin America	177
Chapter 8	The Falashas of Ethiopia	195

Part III The Institutionalization of Black Judaism

Chapter 9	The Commandment Keepers of Harlem, 1930–1950	205
	Photographic Supplement	243
Chapter 10	The Commandment Keepers of Harlem Since 1950	257
Chapter 11	Other Black Jewish Congregations in New York Since 1950	281
Chapter 12	Black Judaism in Chicago Since 1930	315
Chapter 13	Black Judaism in Philadelphia	339
Chapter 14	Black Judaism in Other U.S. Cities Since 1930	363
Chapter 15	Black Judaism in Diaspora: Africa and Israel	387

Part IV Retrospective

Chapter 16	Looking Backward, Looking Forward	435
	An Historiographical Note	447
	Annotated Bibliography	457
	Index	519



List of Illustrations

- Figure 1. Chief William Christian, c.1912, founder of the Church of the Living God. Source: Wm. Christian, *Poor Pilgrim's Work*, privately printed, 1912.
- Figure 2. Prophet William Saunders Crowdy, c.1900, founder of the Church of God and Saints of Christ. Source: *The Constitution Laws and Minutes... Church of God and Saints of Christ...*, Julian S. Mobley, Printer, Cambridge, 1913.
- Figure 3. Elder A. Christian (later Bishop), c.1900, organizer of the African missions for the Church of God and Saints of Christ. Source: *The Constitution Laws and Minutes... Church of God and Saints of Christ...*, Julian S. Mobley, Printer, Cambridge, 1913.
- Figure 4. Rabbi David Ben Itzoch, the “Abyssinian Jew” of Chicago, c.1913. Source: *The Chicago Defender*, August 23, 1913.
- Figure 5. Elder Warien Roberson and followers, c.1925, founder of the Gospel of the Kingdom in Harlem. Source: *The Chicago Defender*, February 27, 1926.
- Figure 6. Rabbi [David] Lazarus, c.1925, a devoted follower of Elder Warien Roberson, and active both in Harlem and Chicago. Source: “Les nuifs de Haarlem,” *Les Juifs*, Lucien Vogel, Paris, 1933, p. 48.
- Figure 7. The Congregation of the Moorish Zionist Temple of the Moorish Jews in Harlem c.1929, Rabbi Israel Ben Newman wearing shawl, President Mordecai Herman on his right, Rabbi Gurian from Algeria on his left (behind), and Joseph Trench, a Cochin Jew, in the felt hat. Source: A. Godbey, *The Lost Tribes A Myth: Suggestions Towards Rewriting Hebrew History*, Duke University Press, 1930, in photo supplement, photo by Guarantee Studio, N.Y.
- Figure 8. Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford, c.1927, music director of Marcus Garvey's U.N.I.A. and founder of Beth B’Nai Abraham in Harlem. Source: B.Z. Goldberg, “A Negro Bris,” *B’Nai B’rith Magazine* (now known as the *B’Nai B’rith International Jewish Monthly*), August, 1927, p. 465, photo by E. Barnett.
- Figure 9. Rabbi Arnold Josiah Ford and members of Beth B’nai Abraham in Harlem, c.1928. Source: A. Schoner (ed.), *This was Harlem, 1900-1950*, Random House, N.Y., 1968, p. 91. What may have been the original photograph was found in the file “Negro Jews” in the Schomburg Collection.

- Figure 10. Rabbi Wentworth Matthew, c.1960, founder of the Commandment Keepers in Harlem. Source: H. Brotz, *The Black Jews of Harlem*, Schocken Books, N.Y., 1970a, ff. p. 72, reprinted through the courtesy of the estate of the late Howard Brotz.
- Figure 11. Leonard Percival Howell in 1933, one of the principal founders of Rastafarianism in Jamaica. Source: D. Bishton, *Black Heart Man*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1986, p. 110.
- Figure 12. Rabbi Abel Respes of Philadelphia and New Jersey in 1982, whose congregation converted en masse from Black Judaism to Judaism. Source: *Long Island Newsday*, February 9, 1982, Part II, p. 5, photo by Brad Bower.
- Figure 13. Rabbi Wentworth Matthew in 1952 with Rabbi Abihu Reuben, the cofounder of the Ethiopian Hebrews in Chicago. Source: *The Chicago Defender*, December 27, 1952.
- Figure 14. Sufi Abdul Hamid, one time Black Jew, and an important cultural change agent in Harlem and Chicago, c.1935. Source: C. McKay, *Harlem: Negro Metropolis*, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., N.Y., 1940, ff. p. 112, photo by Lewis.
- Figure 15. Grover Cleveland Redding in 1924, leader of the “Abyssinians” in Chicago. Source: T.G. Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement*, Berkeley, 1971, p. 146.
- Figure 16. Rabbi Robert S. Devine, c.1968, founder of the United Leaders Council of Hebrew Israelites in Chicago. Source: *Chicago South Suburban News*, Harvey, Illinois, October 4, 1969.
- Figure 17. Prophet William Lewis, c.1968, founder of the House of Judah in Chicago. Source: flyer of Prophet Lewis and the House of Judah, c.1970.
- Figure 18. Yahweh Ben Yahweh, c.1990, the Hebrew Israelite who founded the Temple of Love and the Nation of Yahweh in Miami, Florida. Source: catalog published by P.E.S.S., Seguin, Texas, c.1990.
- Figure 19. Rabbi Levi Ben Levy, c.1975, successor for many Black Jewish functions following the death of Rabbi Matthew in Harlem. Source: *Testimonial 1980 Levi Ben Levy*, booklet published by Beth Shalom Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation Inc., Brooklyn, N.Y., 1980.
- Figure 20. Robert Coleman (Rabbi Avram Coleman), c.1970, ordained Lubavitcher rabbi, and strong critic of all aspects of Black Judaism. Source: *World Over*, February 12, 1971, p.5, courtesy of the Jewish Board of Education, N.Y.
- Figure 21. Yaakov Gladstone and friends in N.Y. c.1967, founder of *Hatzaad Harishon* (the first step). Source: *Pioneer Woman*, May-June, 1967, p. 6.
- Figure 22. Hebrew Israelites from the U.S. building a home in Liberia c.1967. Source: S. Ben Yehudah, *Black Hebrew Israelites from America to the Promised Land*, Vantage Press, N.Y., 1975, p. 219.

- Figure 23. Ben Ammi, c.1992, leader of the Hebrew Israelites in Israel, with Pastor Jeremiah Cummings of the Light of the World Outreach Ministry of Texas, in Dimona, Israel. Source: *The Last Trump*, June-July, 1992, p. 10, organizational newspaper published in Arlington, Texas.
- Figure 24. Rabbi Edward Emmanuel Washington, c.1978, of the House of Israel, with his wife and followers in Guyana. Source: *New York Times*, November 27, 1978.
- Figure 25. Hananiah E. Israel, c.1974, a Black Jewish teacher from Cincinnati, whose instruction led to tragedy in Atlanta. Source: *Cincinnati Post*, July 7, 1974.
- Figure 26. Simon Kivuli, c.1985, founder and leader of the African Church of Israel Nineveh, one of the major Zionist churches in Africa. Source: flyer from the U. of California Media Extension Center, n.d.
- Figure 27. Flyer announcing the first annual convention and parade of the “Royal Black Hebrews” in Chicago, 1971. Source: flyer from the United Leaders Council of Hebrew Israelites, Chicago, 1971.
- Figure 28. A Black Jewish congregation in Chicago, 1971. Source: photograph by the author, 1971.
- Figure 29. The famous “Black Jesus” poster widely circulated among Black Jews and other black groups. Source: poster from the House of Knowledge, Chicago, 1968.



Acknowledgments

This work on Black Judaism was not completed unilaterally. For library research I wish to express appreciation to Ieva Avotins, Pamela Essig, Karen Rios and Kathy Gunnell. I am grateful to Rosi Mabie and Kosh Monday for the completion of difficult manuscript tasks. For useful review I thank Prof. Leo Schelbert and the late Prof. Fred Stern, both of whom expressed themselves more clearly than I have.

For financial assistance I will always be grateful to the Office of the Chancellor, the Campus Research Board, the Institute of Humanities, and Professor Gene Ruoff, all at the University of Illinois at Chicago. The American Jewish Committee has been most helpful in funding typing of the manuscript. For helpful discussion of the many aspects of Black Judaism I am grateful to Graenum Berger, Rabbi Isaac Trainin, Courtney Brown, Robert Weisbord, and T.J. Heijbroek. Much of the material in this work came directly from those Black Jews involved in the movement, and the following have been most helpful; Rabbi Robert Devine, Rabbi Capers Funnye, Jr., Rabbi Abihu Reuben, Rabbi Naphtali ben Israel, Hailu Paris, and Prince Asiel Ben Israel, as well as many members of their organizations and congregations. I am sorry if the work I have presented is not always in line with their specific beliefs and teachings.

I wish to express my gratitude to the following institutions for their invaluable assistance; the New York Public Library, especially the Jewish collection at the main branch and the irreplaceable Afro-American history collection at the Schomburg Library in Harlem, the Carter Woodson Branch Library in Chicago, Daley Library at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Associated Theological Libraries at the University of Chicago. The Kansas State Historical Library in Topeka, the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, and the Rev. Charles Whitsett of the Church of the Living God (CWFF) in Chicago, have all supplied important materials. I am grateful also to Glenn Perkins, of Carolina Academic Press, who saw the work through to completion.



Introduction

Although I have gathered materials on Black Judaism for thirty years, originally several speeches and articles were to be the extent of my work. It was not until I undertook the task of determining just what black church ministers taught in the nineteenth century that I was able to determine an integrative theme, millennial teachings, and I began to understand that all Black Jewish groups traced their ancestry to the Church of the Living God and the Church of God and Saints of Christ. With that framework in mind it became easier to organize my collection of materials in a manner that made historical sense. Previous interpretations of Black Jewish groups had not fully completed these integrative themes.

I have, in an effort to convey some understanding of Black Judaism, occasionally offered some judgements and opinions. My purpose in this treatment has been twofold: (1) to compile information about Black Judaism in a single source; and, (2) to allow this information to be analyzed, criticized and, I hope, enlarged by the reading public, so that incomplete and missing information and more informed opinions can be brought to bear on the subject.

I have taken several liberties with the use of the English language which may cause concern. Instead of repeating such terms as Afro-American or African-American I have, for brevity's sake, frequently used the term "black." I have also made a distinction between "black Judaism" and "Black Judaism." The difference in capitalization should clarify what is being discussed. References to "black Judaism" are made when the person or activity involved represents a black person or activity accepted by the world's Jewish community. Black conversion to Judaism would fall into this category. The term "Black Judaism" refers to those persons and/or groups which maintain a clear identity with Black Jewish teachings which are not accepted by the world's Jewish community. This book is about the latter. "Black Judaism" has been an organized social movement; "black Judaism" has been an isolated social phenomenon.

Also, in order to avoid redundancy, I have avoided repeated references to the fact that Black Judaism is a set of beliefs in a movement that is not acceptable to the world's Jewish community. Since the use of Jewish nomenclature such as rabbi and synagogue, and the celebration of Jewish holy days such as Passover, are found in most Black Jewish groups, to constantly reiterate the fact that this is unacceptable to the world's Jewish community would add considerably to the length of the treatment. Even though the Hebrew Israelites in Israel are now having their residence in that country normalized, after more than thirty years, at no time has the government or the various rabbinates recognized them as an integral component of the world's Jewish community.

Several themes are developed in this work. Black Judaism as an organized social movement had its origins in the Jim Crow American south in 1889. All Black

Jewish groups since that time can trace their ancestry to the Church of the Living God. One of the first outgroup impacts was the founding of the Church of God and Saints of Christ in Lawrence, Kansas, in 1896, from where the movement spread, by 1900, into the major urban centers of the northeast, especially Chicago, Detroit, New York's Harlem, Philadelphia, and most large seaboard cities from Boston to the Carolinas. Missionaries introduced Black Judaism into southern Africa where its teachings had major impact on the development of African nationalism through the emerging independent black church movement. Black Judaism also spread from Harlem into the West Indies where it became integrated into the teachings of the Rastafarians of Jamaica.

The early movement was an expression of cultural black nationalism and found its expression as a result of racial discrimination and oppression in the American south. The beliefs and rhetoric of the Black Jews became the model upon which the Moorish Divine movement and the Nation of Islam were based, as well as the sense of locally placed nationalism and the development of a community of relief from economic backwardness found in Father Divine's depression era "kingdoms," and later among the Black Muslims whose direct predecessors were the Black Jews in Chicago, Detroit, and Harlem. The rhetoric and activities that became so familiar during the civil rights era had their origins in the activities and beliefs of the early Black Jewish leaders, and the impact of the movement has far surpassed the numbers involved. Black Judaism has been a significant omission from African-American history, and many black organizations have actually looked askance at the Black Jews, relegating them to the religious fringe. Yet, Black Judaism is a truly American religious movement, and the successful outcome of the Hebrew Israelite migration to Israel must rank as one of the most important black emigrationist movements since the successful founding of Liberia in 1822.

I have looked, and I found Black Judaism barely alive, but it will reappear in strength during the next Civil Rights era.